

EXPERTISE EFFECTS:
LITERARY PERFORMANCE AND PROFESSIONALIZATION IN THE AGE OF
BARNUM

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores a set of antebellum authors' ambivalent responses to the increasing specialization of intellectual labor, and the corresponding proliferation of professions and vocations, in the context of the ongoing market revolution. In chapters on Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Martin Delany, I show how these writers engaged with, and critiqued, the intensifying specialization incubated by a splintering scientific discourse that militated against the new nation's relative flattened social hierarchy. This crucial but gradual development in the antebellum division of labor – wherein the principle organizing social inequality shifted from the top-down model of mercantilism, to a liberal-individual market of entrepreneurs and aspirants – fostered, in knowledge-workers of all sorts, an imperative to appear institutionally legitimate in the eyes of the lay-public. The cultivation of this professional legitimacy depended on the creation of a perceived public need, and thereby a public market, for the specialist's privileged information about some segment of reality that could be manipulated for the benefit of the non-professional, but not *by* the non-professional. As all three writers liked to point out, individual confidence (or gullibility) and tacit public consensus were all that distinguished legitimate experts from humbugs and hucksters. As a qualified rejection and partial appropriation of professional ideology, I argue, Poe, Melville, and Delany endeavored to generate what I call “expertise effects,” following Roland Barthes's concept of the “reality effect,” those descriptive superfluities in French realist novels that create the illusion of reference, of connection to the real. In other words, these writers challenge the reader to experience, and in some ways to produce through interpretive labor, the impression that their texts outmaneuver and undermine putative expert

discourses through their sheer overfreighting of formal indices of mastery and evasiveness. The characteristic double-gesture – critiquing disciplinary instrumentalization while assuming themselves a posture of access to a zone of privileged, esoteric acumen – is here particularly vexed, since these writers claim no concrete object of knowledge, no positive doctrine or quantifiable field of data. The aesthetic strategies of indirection and concealment – well documented, particularly in Melville’s case, by the critical tradition that valorizes ambiguity as the lodestone of literary quality – dovetail with their rhetorical strategies of argumentative obliquity and occult implication. While their French contemporaries aimed at creating an autonomous sphere of pure art and detached artists, this American vein of rhetorical jugglery renders the boundaries between aesthetic and civil discourses – art and critique, fiction and philosophy, poetry and politics – porous. The weakening of boundaries, of course, facilitated appropriation and invasion.

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INTRODUCTION

GILDED LILIES, PAPER TIGERS, AND IRON CAGES: ANTEBELLUM AMERICA'S INVENTION OF EXPERTISE

A month before the publication of *Walden* (1854), his friend Thoreau's masterpiece of "protest against the dogma that the division of labor is beneficial to the individual," Emerson scribbled this semi-satirical, if factually accurate, list in his journal:

The new professions. The phrenologist; the railroad man; the landscape gardener; the lecturer; the sorcerer, rapper, mesmeriser, medium; the daguerreotypist. Proposed: The Naturalist, and the Social Undertaker.¹

Assuming for a moment that this list was both accurate and comprehensive – in the years since Samuel Johnson had stressed, in 1773, that the term *profession* "is particularly used of divinity, physick, and law," the professional field had grown literally exponentially.² The decades surrounding midcentury saw an explosion in the possible forms of professional vocation, which offered – in the authority-vacuum left by the deflation of the "liberal" professions – new paths of upward mobility as well as new sources of truth. "More than novel and imaginative solutions," writes Arthur Wrobel, antebellum intellectuals of all political stripes "desired some form of authority. To many of them, phrenology, spiritualism, and mesmerism had the potential to design institutions based on

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820-1872*, vol. 8, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1912), 574.

² Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th edition (London, 1773). For the development of professionalism in Britain, see W.J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld, 1966). Though it begins well after my own period concludes, Harold J. Perkin's *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge 1989) is massively influential for studies of this type.

the finest intellectual tools available and to offer sound analyses of human nature.”³ Just as importantly, these fringe disciplines were on the cutting edge of scientific method – they were empirically redoubtable – when judged against the prevailing standards of the time. “For the first time,” writes Wrobel, “men seemed close to discovering empirical proof supporting ontological and teleological premises that their age had inherited from eighteenth-century discourses on natural law – that system of universal and invariable laws which sustain the visible creation.”⁴

The mid-nineteenth century serves as a crucial turning point in the history of expertise as a concept and a rhetoric. The field was filled, rather abruptly, with “new specialisms”: “accountants, surveyors and architects, scientists and engineers, opticians, and dentists – not to mention many on the fringes of professional status, such as actors, artists, writers, poets, journalists.”⁵ More than just new occupations, these new professions, quasi-professions, and even pseudo-professions promised new *solutions* to the problems of modernity – solutions mediated by increasingly specialized forms of expertise.

In a sense, of course, expertise is a relatively new description of an immemorially old thing – as Tzvetan Todorov notes, “a notion may be legitimate even though no corresponding word may as yet exist to designate it.”⁶ Theories of expertise – and

³ Arthur Wrobel, “Introduction,” *Pseudo-Science and Society in 19th-Century America*, ed. Arthur Wrobel (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 10.

⁴ Wrobel, *Pseudo-Science*, 7.

⁵ Penelope J. Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain 1700-1850* (London: Routledge, 1995), 28.

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Notion of Literature,” *New Literary History* 38.1 (2007): 1-12, 1.

theorists posing as experts – seem in retrospect to saturate Western history. Four hundred years before Christ, Sophists wandered the streets of Athens, selling private lessons in rhetoric to the private citizens who would buy. As the titular sophist of Plato's *Gorgias* argues, "Rhetoric is the only area of expertise you need to learn. You can ignore all the rest and still get the better of the professionals!"⁷ This idea horrified Plato's Socrates, for whom rhetoric was not a *technē* (an art or a skilled craft) but a "a phantom of a branch of statesmanship" that aimed to flatter and persuade the listener without teaching anything.⁸ In the archive of proto-experts, the sophistic rhetors, Socrates, with his indomitable *technē*, and Aristotle's *phronimos*, the wise man of virtuous deliberative action, join the Kant of the categorical imperative, and Shaftesbury, the exemplary connoisseur of moral beauty.

In the antebellum era, *expertise* had not yet entered into the zone of autonomous abstraction that would characterize specialization at the turn of the twentieth century: "In nineteenth-century America," writes Paul Lucier, "an expert was generally considered to be a person (invariably a man) with experience and skill, both of which were gained mainly through manual rather than intellectual work."⁹ The "expert" and his or her "expertise" were still, you might say, pre-reified – still in the process of assuming their modern forms as abstractions. Raymond Williams opens his luminous *Culture and Society* with the observation that, over the course of the nineteenth century, the terms "industry" and "art" transformed, on almost isomorphic patterns, from their earlier,

⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24.

⁸ Plato, *Gorgias*, 30.

⁹ Paul Lucier, "The Professional and the Scientist in Nineteenth-Century America," *ISIS* 100.4 (December 2009): 699-732, 703.

shared meaning – both were synonyms for personal skill – into names for quite distinct, essentially autonomous zones of specialization. Before being saturated by the resonances of factory labor and commodity production, industry “was a name for a particular human attribute, which could be paraphrased as ‘skill, assiduity, perseverance, diligence.’”¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, this meaning was supplemented, and rather quickly overtaken, by a new, and significantly more abstract, sense: “*Industry*, with a capital letter, is thought of as a thing in itself – an institution, a body of activities – rather than simply a human attribute” (CS, xi). The word was abstracted further still when, in the 1830s, the whole system of industrial institutions came collectively to be known as “*Industrialism*” (CS, xii). “Art” followed a similar course of development-by-abstraction: from its eighteenth-century upbringing as yet another “skill,” it flowered into a whole world-apart of aesthetics, poetry, and taste.

The term “expert” follows this pattern with shadowy exactitude. (This observation will perhaps not surprise readers familiar with Williams’s entry for “expertise” in *Keywords*: “It appeared in English, as an adjective, in 1C14, at the same time as the closely related experience. It is characteristic that it began to be used as a noun – *an expert* – from eC19, in an industrial society which put increasing emphasis on specialization and qualification.”)¹¹ The implication, perverse as it seems to suggest, is that the eventual identification of expertise with scientific inquiry and/or systematic rationality was not foreordained – or, as Mark Essig well puts it: “The distinction

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983 [1957]), xi. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text as CS.

¹¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1985 [1976]), 129.

between ‘the expert’ and ‘the public’ was not the natural or inevitable result of advances in knowledge. Rather, the distinction was laboriously constructed and served the interests of professional groups whose very existence depended upon distinguishing their knowledge and practices from those of the general population.”¹²

The term “expert” was almost never – with some notable exceptions – employed as a noun until after mid-century. (One such exception, to return to Emerson, can be found in *Representative Men*’s description of Plato, the representative philosopher: “He is more than an expert, or a schoolman, or a geometer, or the prophet of a peculiar message. He represents the privilege of the intellect, the power, namely, of carrying up every fact to successive platforms and so disclosing in every fact a germ of expansion. These expansions are in the essence of thought.”)¹³ As Charles Richardson’s widely-circulated 1836 dictionary explained it, “An *expert* man is one who has the readiness, adroitness, presence of mind of *experience*, of much practice.”¹⁴ The definition is almost aphoristically vague: An expert man has seen plenty; he’s ready for just about anything. The thing to note is the kind of knowledge Richardson ascribes to the expert man. Indeed, it seems less that the expert man *knows* something than that he is *predisposed to react* in a certain way, or range of ways. In this common adjectival form, the word “expert” indicated some form of practical proficiency to the subject it modified. So, for instance,

¹² Mark Essig, “Poison Murder and Expert Testimony: Doubting the Physician in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 14.1 (2002): 177-210, 208.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” *Representative Men*, in *Essays & Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 655-56.

¹⁴ Charles Richardson, *A New Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (London: William Pickering, 1836), 737.

in a bizarre sketch from James Kirke Paulding's *Salmagundi*, a character named Launcelot Langstaff recollects receiving "the discipline of the birchen twig" from "the most expert flogger for fifty miles round" as punishment for stealing from an orchard as a child.¹⁵ Military, naval, and sporting competencies were among the most common fields designated by the term's adjectival form. "By daily use and practice," wrote English historian Sharon Turner, the cavalymen of the Anglo-Saxon army became "so expert, that they could stop their horses at full speed down a declivity."¹⁶ George Washington, noted biographer Jared Sparks, "was expert in the art of duck-shooting, and often practised it."¹⁷ It was likewise typical for people to be classed experts in artisanal or mechanical occupations. In the *Book of Mormon*, the Nephites adapted to the deforestation of their adopted homeland, Zarahemla, by developing a novel architectural style: they became "exceeding expert in the working of cement; therefore did they build houses of cement, in the which they did dwell."¹⁸

The theory of competence underpinning a phrase like *expert flogger* (or marksmen or swimmer) puts private experience and manual skill front and center. An expert swimmer is good at swimming, and this is so because, if it doesn't quite make perfect, practice *improves*. Practice means engaging in the process of improving technique through disciplined repetition, which is to say, gaining experience. On the

¹⁵ James Kirke Paulding, "Hic Finis Fandi," *Salmagundi: Second Series*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 297.

¹⁶ Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest*, vol. 1 (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1840), 42.

¹⁷ Jared Sparks, *The Life of George Washington* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1853), 105.

¹⁸ *The Book of Mormon*, trans. Joseph Smith, Jr. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1921), 364.

other hand, practice means *praxis*, the exercise of skills, strategies, and social roles. The distinction between rehearsal and performance, the accrual of experience and the application of expertise, tends to break down. Practicing makes you a more capable practitioner, but acting as a practitioner counts *as practice*. The period's instructional manuals presented tutorials on the Virgilian credo, "*experto crede*" – trust one who has experience. Eschewing abstract formalism, one sporting guidebook presented its training regimen for improved marksmanship on rigorously practical grounds: "After being expert in one position, change to another, until perfect in all."¹⁹ A compendium of exploits and amusements for boys tantalized its more dogged disciples with a promise of simian agility: "By practice, the climber becomes so expert, that when the branches hang tolerably low... he may seize a branch, swing himself up, and then proceed from bough to bough, or even tree to tree, should they be planted close enough."²⁰

Specialization & Scientificity

At the risk of over-generality, the discourse of expertise – social criticism, how-to manuals, encomia to masters, compendia of historical exemplars – experienced two (inextricably related) changes, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century: first, experts became expert in some *occupational specialization*; second, the essence of experts' expertise was ascribed to some *scientific basis*. The magnetic attraction between expertise and occupation applied even when the occupation in question was not precisely legitimate (or legal). In his 1835 omnibus history of notorious trials, John Jay Smith

¹⁹ William H. Schreiner, *Schreiner's Sporting Manual* (Philadelphia, 1841), 88.

²⁰ Samuel Williams, *The Boy's Treasury of Sports, Pastimes, and Recreations* (London: D. Bogue, 1844), 94.

describes the criminal education of famous Irish pickpocket Jenny Diver, née Mary Young, thus: “She now regularly applied two hours every day in qualifying herself for an expert thief, by attending to the instructions of experienced practitioners... In a few months she became so expert in her profession, as to acquire great consequence among her associates, who distinguished her by the appellation of Jenny Diver, on account of her remarkable dexterity.”²¹ What’s prophetic about this description is the way it implements some of the key terms of professionalization: education, conceived as both experiential instruction and credentialing (“qualifying”), together with a community of peers (“associates”) that serves as the evaluative body for the individual “in her profession.”

Though the genre of general interest primer – from *The Expert Letter Writer* (1830) to *How to Become an Expert Shot* (1875) – remained common throughout the century, instructional books turned to increasingly specialized spheres of vocational activity; the rhetoric of expertise grew ever more intimate in its spontaneous association with vocational or professional skill. After the Civil War, it became conventional to designate an individual as *an expert*, as opposed to *expert at* or *expert in* some field of endeavor. Expertise became concretized and *embodied* in the authors of case studies – *The Handwriting of Junius: Professionally Investigated by Charles Chabot, Expert* (1871) – and field reports – the *Prospectus and Report of C.S. Miller, Mining Expert* (1877). This trajectory, and the sheer proliferation of the term’s use suggests a culture-wide tendency to accept the title “expert” as a carrier of professional distinction.

²¹ John Jay Smith, *Celebrated Trials of All Countries, and Remarkable Cases of Criminal Jurisprudence* (Philadelphia: L.A. Godey, 1836), 443.

The relatively straightforward understanding of expertise, as an index of an individual's mastery of concrete skills and know-how, underwent a gradual but profound shift, as contributors to the great body of General Knowledge increasingly trumpeted the scientific foundations of their work. As the appeal to scientific basis became increasingly conventional, it became increasingly convincing, even to otherwise skeptical observers. Recounting a dockside conversation with a young English naturalist, Mark Twain observed, with uncharacteristic credulity, "I had a fair knowledge of his subject – layman's knowledge – to begin with, but it was his teachings which crystallized it into scientific form and clarity – in a word, gave it value."²² According to the implied economy of knowledge, here, even relatively well-cultivated lay-knowledge is basically worthless, at least if we take seriously Twain's assertion that scientific instruction alone confers "value."

To understand this, we need to make sense of the instability of "science," as a concept, in antebellum American society. In the eighteenth century, the concepts of "science" and "literature" alike stood in almost direct opposition to the very ideas of specialization and professionalization. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, literature was not synonymous with the specialized conception of literariness as a world apart. In the context of what he calls British "Romantic Literary Professionalism," Paul Keen urges critics to reconsider, with a fresh emphasis on historical particularity, the ways in which nineteenth-century authors and critics understood "literature," since the term "was frequently used interchangeably with other words such as 'science' and 'philosophy' to

²² Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad, Following the Equator, Other Travels*, ed. Roy Blount, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2010), 476.

suggest a body of writings committed to the discovery of truth.”²³ This generalist conception is strikingly exemplified by William Godwin:

Literature has reconciled the whole thinking world respecting the great principles of the system of the universe, and extirpated upon this subject the dreams of romance and the dogmas of superstition. Literature has unfolded the nature of the human mind, and Locke and others have established certain maxims respecting man, as Newton has done respecting matter, that are generally admitted for unquestionable.²⁴

Godwin’s description attributes to literature a series of surprising effects: efficiency, public service, demystification, consensus-building, and scientific certainty. In this conception, “men of letters” and “men of science” were functionally interchangeable terms for those republican gentlemen who avowedly pursued their crafts as disinterested avocations – passions or hobbies conducted for the public good, rather than their own.

The best efforts of Locke and Hegel to sophisticate epistemology were, Sydney Ross writes, wasted on the English vernacular in the century’s first half: “The precise classifications of the philosophies and their constituent sciences were the technical jargon of the Universities: outside the classrooms... the terms *philosophy* and *science* were interchangeable in certain connections: e.g., the experimental science or experimental philosophy; and moral science or moral philosophy.” This “period of synonymity,” which Ross dates between “approximately 1800-1850,” was complicated but not undone by a growing tendency, “perhaps influenced by the example of French usage,” casually to group theology and metaphysics under the aegis of philosophy, and “the experimental

²³ Paul Keen, “‘The Most Useful of Citizens’: Towards a Romantic Literary Professionalism,” *Studies in Romanticism* 41.4 (Winter 2002): 627-654, 640.

²⁴ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013 [1793]), 21.

and physical branches of knowledge” under the aegis of science.”²⁵ The word “scientist” was coined in 1834 by Cambridge historian and philosopher William Whewell, though it did not receive full treatment until the 1840 publication of his *The Philosophy of Inductive Sciences*. Surprisingly, Whewell explained his neologism by an analogy to the idea of the “Artist”: “As we cannot use *physician* for a cultivator of physics, I have called him a *Physicist*. We need very much a name to describe a cultivator of science in general. I should incline to call him a *Scientist*. Thus we might say, that as an Artist is a Musician, Painter, or Poet, a Scientist is a Mathematician, Physicist, or Naturalist.”²⁶ Gradually, Ross notes, science was “presented merely as another alternative profession; and the word *scientist* carried no less desirable connotations than did *physician*, *lawyer*, or *clergyman*.”²⁷

Though perhaps no place or time in history has been epistemologically consistent, the formal and tacit protocols for organizing knowledge were particularly madcap in the United States of the mid-nineteenth century. The spontaneous philosophy underpinning Jacksonian Democracy was at once politically populist and metaphysically objectivist. As Thomas Bender puts it, the “style of thinking common to popular and scientific thought” was “a rather simple empiricism. It was concerned almost entirely with the direct observation of surface appearances. Its powers of explanation were quite limited, but it

²⁵ Sidney Ross, “Scientist: The Story of a Word,” in *Nineteenth-Century Attitudes: Men of Science* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 6.

²⁶ William Whewell, *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (London: John W. Parker, 1840), cxiii.

²⁷ Ross, “Scientist,” 2-3.

did have the advantage of being ‘democratic.’”²⁸ (George H Daniels has, deliciously, described the era’s characteristic vulgar empiricism as “the reign of Bacon” in American science.)²⁹ The representative thinkers of this period – Daniel Drake, Henry Ward Beecher, and P.T. Barnum – held, as a matter of principle, that “reality was generally accessible to common observation,” and that valid knowledge was “concretized in individual relationships to nature and society” (IPL, 13). If appearances could be deceiving, one needed only to look hard enough and long enough for a pure signal to emerge from the noise. Thomas L. Haskell gives a good summary of this outlook’s implicit metaphysical assumptions: “the social order is fundamentally rational and will reveal itself to the patient inquirer. Beneath the confused surface of events there is a harmonious order, a realm of ‘Truth,’ in which the interests of all members of society blend without friction.”³⁰

The Jacksonian Assault & Its Backlash

One of the great historical ironies of the 1840s is that its ideological embrace and rhetorical trumpeting of the principles of Democracy ran parallel with the first vigorous rumblings of the professionalizing movement that would pick up steam throughout the remainder of the century. The onslaught of populism in the century’s first third had

²⁸ Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997 [1993]), 25. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text as IPL.

²⁹ George H. Daniels, *American Science in the Age of Jackson* (New York: Columbia UP, 1968),

³⁰ Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000 [1977]), 101.

created a climate of suspicion of the elitist implications of vocational expertise. Notes John Higham, “the intellectual specialist affronted egalitarian values: he dealt in secrets only a few could share. In Jacksonian America, disdain for esoteric knowledge and hostility toward any narrow delimitation of competence flourished.”³¹ This mistrust of differential access, both to information and to the ability to use that information, implied that each individual was her own best judge; unless it was transparent and legible to the layperson, the consensual and conventional wisdom of professionals – whether clergymen, lawyers, or doctors – was practically irrelevant. After 1830, writes Samuel Haber, an “egalitarian impulse” increasingly animated the culture’s interrogation of the “honor” and “gentlemanly authority” due the classical professions – the very qualities “that distinguished them from ordinary occupations” in the first place. By midcentury, the “classical” professions were “recoiling before great Jacksonian attacks on aristocracy and privilege.”³²

More and more observers of the cultural scene found it increasingly self-evident that doctors, lawyers, and preachers stood in all-but-direct opposition to the real interests of their clients; professionals, everyone seemed to notice, became useful only when laypersons were faced with crises that outstripped their inner resources. In this spirit, P.T. Barnum quipped, “the learned professions depend solely for support upon the misfortunes, miseries, or foibles of mankind.”³³ Awash in the democratic spirit of

³¹ John Higham, “The Matrix of Specialization,” *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979), 11.

³² Samuel Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor in the American Professions, 1750-1900* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991), 93-4.

³³ P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 2000), 371.

exposure, people felt newly empowered to reject the claims of elites; knowledge was, or seemed to be, socialized, redistributed to the people as a natural consequence of America's democratic principles. Caught up in a kind of overblown enthusiasm for individual capacities, writes Neil Harris,

avid democrats assumed that any problem could be expressed clearly, concisely, and comprehensibly enough for the ordinary man to solve it. Secret information and private learning were anathema. All knowledge was meant to be shared. Contemporary pamphleteers delighted in ridiculing experts and specialists; the expert turned out frequently to be a pedantic ignoramus, easily fooled himself; the learned doctor was often a victim of scientific nonsense and deserved to be overruled by intelligent laymen.³⁴

If this were true, the esoteric nature of professional knowledge could only be an obscurantist cover-up, a needless complexification of problems that could be solved by common sense.

There were, of course, problems endemic to this brand of epistemological populism. In Gordon Wood's impossibly limpid formulation, "If men were all alike, equal in their rights and in their interestedness, then there were no specially qualified gentlemen who stood apart from the whole society with a superior and disinterested perspective. All people were the same: all were ordinary and all were best represented by ordinary people. That was democracy."³⁵ If nobody knew better than anybody else, every person was his or her own best judge – which meant every person fell with full force on the sword of his or her mistakes. In the Jacksonian era, writes Neal Harris, self-reliant individuals, "accustomed to examining the truth or validity of every person, idea, object or act presented to them... became easy targets for pseudoscientific explanations, for detailed

³⁴ Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 74.

³⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1992), 295.

descriptions of fictional machinery, for any fantasy that was couched in the bland neutrality of a technological vocabulary.”³⁶ Without trustworthy advisors, those overconfident in their ability to decide for themselves were easy “prey for all the hoaxers, confidence men, and tricksters like Edgar Allan Poe and P.T. Barnum who soon popped up everywhere.”³⁷ In the period’s conduct manuals, Karen Halttunen observes, the confidence man became “the archetypal man-on-the-make who threatened to contaminate all he encountered with the depravity of his own nature... In the open society, it was feared, because all men were on the make, all men were in danger of becoming confidence men, whose claims to a new and higher social status were a dangerous form of hypocrisy.”³⁸

Whatever its reassuring populist implications, then, this observational style ultimately “betrayed a propensity to oversimplify and evade problems” (IPL, 26). The naive empiricism that insisted on the Jacksonian everyperson’s intellectual sovereignty from any trained savant or polymathic boffin was gradually swept away by a more sophisticated, and not a little dreadful, appreciation of the complexity of creation. No longer was reality thought to be buried just beneath the glaze of appearance; to reach it now necessitated complex negotiations, piloted by esoteric abstractions and arsenals of technique – the very things that would, in time, become characteristic of the new professions. As limitations of naive empiricism gradually became clear, there was “a growing sense that understanding must penetrate internal qualities, processes, and

³⁶ Harris, *Humbug*, 72.

³⁷ Wood, *Radicalism*, 362.

³⁸ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982), 192.

structures” in order to yield anything but clumps of disorganized data. New schools of increasingly specialized thought relocated the access points for knowledge of reality to “forms and processes one step removed from direct human experience” (IPL, 13). This move to abstraction augured the demotion of private skill: gradually, “expert swimmers” became “strong swimmers”; “expert marksmen” became “good shots”; “expert floggers” became... well... *less distinguished*.

The middle years of the 1830s had “showed a spike in American prosperity like nothing ever seen before”; but the booms, as they will, heralded busts, and the Panic of 1837 touched off a counter-cycle of recession and deflation that would linger until almost midcentury.³⁹ The brace of hard times “focused everyone’s attention on the inconstancy of economic growth, the unpredictability of capitalist enterprise, and the capricious distribution of losses and gains that accompanied the market revolution.”⁴⁰ People felt, more acutely than ever before, the precariousness of market dependence, and took up various spiritual and emotional orthopedics for support. In the muddy wake of the Panic, writes Sellers, “misgivings spread through the middle class... to multiply seekers for more satisfying spiritualities and social arrangements. Fad followed fad – mesmerism, phrenology, spirit rapping, animal magnetism, water cures,” not to mention apocalyptic cults and utopian communes.⁴¹ If these were “fads” (and of course they were) they were also *market segments* – niches of professional service carved into an ever-expanding, and

³⁹ John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 92.

⁴⁰ Larson, *Market Revolution in America*, 97.

⁴¹ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 383.

increasingly monolithic, culture industry. New markets made for a sharp uptick in the range of specialties theoretically available to those entrepreneurial men and women who found themselves unmoved by the drab enticements of wage-labor. All manner of aspirants stepped up to fill the void. Some were sincere seekers, earnest philanthropists and lovers of knowledge – but with them swarmed a horde of charlatans and false prophets. It was not always possible to tell the difference; in some cases there did not seem to be a difference. As the matrix of specialization grew denser and more forbidding, expertise became an increasingly key commodity – but *demonstrating* expertise became increasingly difficult, and increasingly necessary.

The effect of Jacksonian populism was not simply a leveling of cultural prestige, but the creation of new avenues of prestige that proved elitist in their own right. Democracy did not so much wipe its enemies from the field as force them underground to regroup, only to reemerge in even more concentrated forms. Building on Harris's work, Thomas Bender designates the period from roughly 1820-1860 as the "Age of Barnum." In this span, America's urban culture offered "no coherent and demanding institutional structure for intellectual culture. Instead of a clearly articulated community of discourse that established intellectual authority, the urban intellectual, now standing essentially alone, faced a heterogeneous, anonymous, and vastly expanded audience" (IPL, 88). In place of the comparatively stable "mechanisms of recruitment into the professions and learned society" that had provided continuity on the basis of class status and family connections, "the Age of Barnum witnessed an intellectual free-for-all, as all manner of men sought an audience in the city's public culture" (IPL, 89). Bender vividly describes the predicament:

Lacking a solid impersonal basis for establishing a relationship with their audience, urban intellectuals relied on their personalities and the appearance of intimate disclosure to establish the trust and authority essential for intellectual community. But personality was a poor substitute for the shared intellectual framework and clear social categories that had earlier given shape to local intellectual life. In such a situation, the eighteenth-century penchant for argument gave way to the quest for ‘influence’ (IPL, 12).

In this swirling milieu of circulation without authoritative foundations, authors and intellectuals were forced to cope with and capitalize on dual (and dueling) historical developments: on the one hand, the growing commodification of aesthetic concepts like personality, influence, and merit and, on the other, the culture-wide project of specialization in all forms labor that placed a premium on systematic rationality.

Because of the (perceived, if not actual) increase in the distance between metaphysics and science, anxiety over the utility of scientific foundations would afflict the ministry most pressingly. In the *Popular Science Monthly* of 1872, Henry Ward Beecher warned, “our profession is in danger, and in great danger, of going under, and of working effectively only among the relatively less informed and intelligent of the community... We are in danger of having the intelligent part of society go past us.”⁴² If the religious orders had formerly enjoyed a near-monopoly on the authoritative understanding of human nature – and the doling out of advice, on a professional basis, that such a study afforded – this investigatory impulse was being redirected into different channels, and legitimated on alternative intellectual foundations. At the time of writing, however, Beecher could attribute to men of God at best a lay-understanding: “preachers are quite as well acquainted with human nature as the average of well-informed citizens, but far less than lawyers, or merchants, or teachers, or, especially, politicians... The study

⁴² Henry Ward Beecher, “The Study of Human Nature,” *Popular Science Monthly* 1 (1872): 327-35, 328.

of human nature is not going to be left in the hands of the church or the ministry. It is going to be part of every liberal education, and will be pursued on a scientific basis.”⁴³ In contrast with medicine and law, the pressure on the clergy would only increase over the decades.

The discourse of “the female sphere,” or “women’s work,” exemplifies the relationship between the quest for legitimacy and the need for a basis in science in the new professions. By the century’s close, the rhetorical appeals of domestic treatises were increasingly grafted onto the discourse of vocational mastery: take, for instance, *The Expert Waitress: A Manual for the Pantry, Kitchen, and Dining-Room* (1894) and *The Expert Cleaner: A Handbook of Practical Information for All Who Like Clean Homes, Tidy Apparel, Wholesome Food, and Healthful Surroundings* (1899). The thinker most germinal to this tradition and its development was Henry Ward’s sister, Catharine Beecher – “America’s first female philosopher and theologian to publish her work in a systematic form,” according to Mark David Hall.⁴⁴ The trajectory of Beecher’s career offers a powerful illustration of the shift in the discursive markers that lent legitimacy to social thought. In the preface to first edition of *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1842), Beecher, standing in for the reader, poses a question to herself, and essays an answer:

What qualifications has the writer, which entitle her to be received as authority on the various topics embraced in this work?

In reply to this, she would say, that, being the eldest of a large family, she has, from early life, been accustomed to the care of children, and to the performance of most domestic duties. It has also been her good fortune to reside, most of her life, in the families of exemplary and accomplished housekeepers, and under the supervision of such friends, most of the domestic operations, detailed in this work, have been performed by the writer.

⁴³ Beecher, “Study,” 327, 331.

⁴⁴ Mark David Hall, “Catharine Beecher: America’s First Female Philosopher and Theologian” *Fides et Historia* 32.1 (Winter/Spring 2000): 65-80, 65.

But much in these pages is offered, not as the results of her own experience, but rather as gleanings from the experience of the more competent to instruct in such matters; and in gaining them, the writer has often had to learn her own deficiencies, by the light of superior excellence in others. Nothing is here presented, which has not received the sanction of some of the most judicious and experienced mothers and housekeepers in this Nation.⁴⁵

Here, Beecher presents mastery of domestic work in traditional and experiential terms. She is qualified by her years of service to her own household, and by the intellectual contributions of women, whose “superior excellence” provides a normative ideal for individual advancement in the practice of domestic economy.

The *Treatise*’s third edition (1849), which omits the earlier preface, aims to found the book’s legitimacy on more objective – or, in Beecher’s terms, scientific and systematic – grounds. As Beecher writes in a new preface, because “young girls, especially in the more wealthy classes, *are not trained for their profession*,” the problems facing domestic life could best be remedied by placing

domestic economy on an equality with the other sciences in female schools. This should be done because it *can* be properly and systematically taught (not *practically*, but as a *science*), as much so as *political economy* or *moral science*, or any other branch of study; because it embraces knowledge, which will be needed by young women at all times and in all places; because this science can never be *properly* taught until it is made a branch of *study*; and because this method will secure a dignity and importance in the estimation of young girls, which can never be accorded while they perceive their teachers and parents practically attaching more value to every other department of science than this.⁴⁶

In 1869, Beecher and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, published *The American Woman’s Home: or, Principles of Domestic Science*, a significant revision of the *Treatise*.

⁴⁵ Catharine Esther Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb, 1841), 8.

⁴⁶ Catharine Esther Beecher, “Preface to the Third Edition,” *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1849), 5-6.

Though much from the earlier volume – the emphasis on Christian faith, duty to the nation – remained, “a great portion of it is entirely new, embodying *the latest results of science*,” including “all that is properly embraced in a complete Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy.” In her introduction, Catharine Beecher describes her many years of activism as tending towards a common goal: “to promote the establishment of *endowed* institutions, in which women shall be properly trained for their profession, as both housekeepers and health-keepers.”⁴⁷

Scientific principles, it turned out, conferred legitimacy only when they were matched with institutional apparatuses. In this way, experts became professionals, and so the modern professions were formed. Once minted as legitimate, the professions commoditize their credentials, offering special services for profit. Expertise gained social legitimacy by being interspersed throughout a community of competent practitioners. To the extent that such a community was successful, accepted, and embedded in the social system, it became professional.

Hopeful Poison: Medical Jurisprudence & Deregulation, 1815-1840

Intriguingly, the *legal* concept of the expert (the man of science as expert witness) developed well before its occupational-professional cousin. Expert testimony sprouted from the complex interpenetration of medicine and law, based on inheritances and transformations of the English, German, and especially French traditions. As Tal Golan has shown, it had until the late eighteenth century been widely acceptable for “lay

⁴⁷ Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home: or, Principles of Domestic Science; Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, and Christian Homes* (New York: J.B. Ford and Co., 1869), 15.

witnesses to testify as to their opinion, if this was based on direct knowledge of the facts of the case.”⁴⁸ In that century’s closing decades, however, opinion became the special purview of men of science, who in turn became (through the alchemy of credentialing) experts. The legal profession increasingly acknowledged that the best and most objective evidence was based on scientific knowledge. Consequently, “men of science” increasingly found themselves introduced into legal proceedings as “expert witnesses,” though their “scientific expertise was sold in an unregulated fashion on an open legal market” (LMLN, 151). Hired and paid by the side they represented rather than the state, expert witnesses were heavily incentivized to give partisan testimony. This meant the business of witnessing was subject to all the vicissitudes of entrepreneurial ambition, and experts were widely suspected and accused of acting in the base interests of personal profit and publicity: “The constant spectacle of eminent doctors, chemists, geologists, engineers, and other men of science contradicting each other on the witness stand,” writes Golan, “cast serious doubts on their integrity and on their science in the eyes of the public” (LMLN, 150).

Ideally, the expert witness’s role was to establish a baseline reality, an ontological fact of the matter about the authenticity or artificiality of a case; scientific mastery would peel back phenomena to expose “the hidden laws of nature, which ordained powers that no part of the earth’s surface was immune to” (LMLN, 30). In practice, this process was impeded from two angles: first, by the almost inevitable failure of scientific explanation to approximate the kind of heroic-visionary power fantasized for it; and second, by the

⁴⁸ Tal Golan, *Laws of Men and Laws of Nature The History of Scientific Expert Testimony in England and America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2004), 22. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text as LMLN.

fact that the addressees of the witness's expertise – the judge, jury, attorneys hostile and friendly, and sundry other courtroom personages – *were not experts*. The responsibility of the expert witness was precisely to translate the substance of esoteric knowledge into a form intelligible to (or, failing that, persuasive or authoritative-seeming to) a lay audience. Into the conceptual clown car of experts was stuffed a motley parade of the tradesmen and artisans: Henry Wade Rogers's hefty 1883 tome, *The Law of Expert Testimony*, outlined the testamentary function of nautical men, railroad men, insurance men, civil engineers, surveyors, millers and mill-wrights, machinists, mechanics, masons, farmers and gardeners, painters and photographers, lumbermen, experts in patent, trademark and copyright cases, and the cryptic category of "business men as to usage."⁴⁹

Naturally, expert testimony was based on the idea that expert witnesses knew something worth knowing, which was not always self-evidently true even to experts themselves. In 1898, an anonymous writer took to the pages of the *Medical Era* to rail against the corrupting influence of quacks and charlatans on the collective reputation of expert witnesses. The jeremiad doubles, perhaps unintentionally, as a gnomic verse meditation on sincerity and irony, authenticity and imposture:

There is much difference between an expert and an 'expert.'
The expert is familiar with his subject, and testifies to facts, as
he sees them, regardless of consequences.
The 'expert,' on the contrary, pretends to knowledge that he
does not possess, and favors the 'side' that fees him.
Then the indiscriminating public condemns expert testimony
and ridicules the experts.
All through the fault of the 'experts.'⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Henry Wade Rogers, *The Law of Expert Testimony* (St. Louis: Central Law Journal Co., 1891 [1888]), 271.

⁵⁰ "Expert Testimony and Fees for Experts," *Medical Era* 16.2 (1898), 17.

The seemingly constitutive ambiguity in definitions of the expert, as a concept or individual, fueled progressively more feverish attempts to pin them down. Expert testimony was already in wide use; the problem was not access, but *legitimation*. The opposition – the expert against the ‘expert’ – was endemic to the adversarial system the courts had adopted in the late eighteenth century, in which judges ceded control of argument and evidentiary presentations to the rival teams of attorneys representing the prosecution and defense. A zero-sum contest between two opposing parties, each adversary brought its own expert, or posse of experts; and, all things being equal, each expert could expect to be right (that is, to win) precisely half the time, a less-than-dazzling ratio for a class of persons called for their competence, experience, and sagacity. Originally based on a kind of republican trust and fellow-feeling between gentlemen, expert testimony gradually degenerated into an acrimonious battleground of partisan attacks.

In order to bolster their legal bona fides, physicians rushed to theorize a system of “medical jurisprudence,” a field of study focused on the intersection between law and medicine. America’s early theorists of “legal medicine,” writes James Mohr, “hoped ultimately for structural changes that would sustain further development of their field and give them a secure economic foundation. To effect those structural changes they had from the beginning of the century looked to the state.”⁵¹ One early effort in this direction – the seminal 1811 lecture “On the Study of Medical Jurisprudence” – saw Benjamin Rush exulting in the potentially huge (and lucrative) overlap between medicine and law. If

⁵¹ James C. Mohr, *Doctors and the Law: Medical Jurisprudence in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 83. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text as DL.

physicians could manage to extend their domain of expertise to encompass a the statutes of common law, Rush gushed,

the extent of the services you will thereby be enabled to render to individuals and the public: fraud and violence may be detected and punished: unmerited infamy, and death, may be prevented: the widow and the orphan may be saved from ruin: virgin purity and innocence may be vindicated: conjugal harmony and happiness may be restored: unjust and oppressive demands upon the services of your fellow citizens may be obviated; and the sources of public misery in epidemic diseases may be removed, by your testimony in a court of justice. Nor is this all. By cultivating the science I am now recommending, you may extend its benefits, beyond our courts of justice, to the legislatures of our country, and thereby become the means of obtaining laws... which shall place testimony... upon such a basis, as to relieve judges and jurors from the painful necessity of acting in a discretionary manner.⁵²

The ambition of such a declaration is to elevate medicine into a literally legislative entity, and the administering physicians into literal legislators. The passage gathers up all the ideological facets of antebellum professionalism: the cultivation of science (medical jurisprudence); claims of jurisdictional control (over medical treatment *and* law); securing a market for professional commodities (medical treatment, expert testimony in court, and ultimately governance); public service and *noblesse oblige* (alleviating public misery, protecting virgin purity). It is, of course, something of an aspirational, even utopian, fantasy of professional apotheosis – especially considering how few of the treatments doctors like Rush prescribed actually healed anything.

The intuitive binary between “legitimate” medicine and illegitimate quackery obscures more than it reveals. As vituperative a critic as any of what he designated “Homeopathy and Its Kindred Delusions,” the elder Oliver Wendell Holmes was still forced to admit, “if the whole *materia medica, as now used*, could be sunk to the sea, it

⁵² Benjamin Rush, “On the Study of Medical Jurisprudence,” *Sixteen Introductory Lectures* (New York: Dabor Science Publications, 1977 [1811]), 392-93.

would be all the better for mankind – and all the worse for the fishes.”⁵³ Though it seems inescapably counterintuitive in retrospect, regular practitioners were no more capable of healing than were their alternative competitors. As historians have overwhelmingly demonstrated, in fact, the treatment regimes of “regular” medicine did a great deal more harm than good (and were, in fact, significantly more dangerous than its “fringe” competitors). Heroic medicine’s physical therapies consisted of such violences as phlebotomy (bleeding), blistering, sweating, cupping, and dehydration; its pharmacopeia consisted largely of poisons like calomel (mercury chloride), arsenic compounds, tartar emetic, ipecac, digitalis.

A particularly harrowing window onto the madcap scramble that constituted even the most mainstream medical treatment can be glimpsed in a review of Benjamin Phillips’s *A Treatise on the Urethra* in the quintessentially orthodox *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* of 1834. The review excerpts Phillips’s most strident piece of negative advice for treating “acute urethritis” in his own words: “The application of leeches to the penis, recommended by some authors, is certainly an improper practice; it is frequently followed by ecchymosis, caused by the infiltration of blood into the lax cellular tissue of that organ, occasioning inflammation, and sometimes gangrene.” The reviewer is not only not convinced by this advice; he stages his counterpoint as the hard-won fruits of practical experience accumulated: “Here we are compelled to differ entirely from Mr. Phillips – having directed the free application of leeches along the route of the urethra in numerous cases, with marked benefit, and without producing any unpleasant

⁵³ Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., *Medical Essays 1842-1882* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1883), 203.

symptoms.”⁵⁴ As historian William G. Rothstein ironically observes, “it hardly need be observed that regular medicine was not scientific.”⁵⁵

It makes little sense to speak of “mainstream medicine” in this context; in Andrew Abbott’s terms, “The ‘doing of healing’ became a free-for-all.”⁵⁶ Few medical practitioners – even regulars – had attended medical school, and fewer still were credentialed medical doctors. Despite their own ineffectuality, that is, the characteristic charge regular physicians leveled against their competitors was that of quackery – the inability to understand medical theory or perform medical practice. In 1849, a jaded Naval physician offered this portrait of the obstacles impeding the work of the legitimate medical establishment:

It is well known, that all efforts to limit the exercise of the profession of medicine to those who have the abilities and acquirements essential to its proper understanding, have utterly failed; and ignorant and impudent pretenders, under a great variety of humbugging titles, come before the public with equal rights, and a better chance for popular favor, than the regular practitioner. The public, unfortunately, seems to consider all efforts to limit the practice of medicine to those of scientific attainment, as the attempt of a sect to monopolize rights, and to infringe upon the largest liberty. Under this latitudinarian license, we have Indian doctors, urine doctors, root doctors, water doctors, stream doctors, and homeopaths, preying upon the community.⁵⁷

In short, American medicine at midcentury would have been hilarious if it had not been so dangerous. This sounds for all the world like a concerned reformer, interested in nothing so much as the exposure of charlatans and elimination of quacks from public life.

⁵⁴ Review of “A Treatise on the Urethra” by Benjamin Phillips, *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 16 (1835), 152.

⁵⁵ William G. Rothstein, *American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century: From Sects to Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972), 150.

⁵⁶ Andrew Delano Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988), 21.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Mohr, *Doctors and the Law*, 89.

And perhaps this is precisely what the Navy doctor was – his sympathies, though, fall, cleanly and clearly, on the side of “the regular practitioner,” whose disciple was what later came to be called “heroic medicine.” The practice of regular physicians was based less on rigorous empirical testing or laboratory verification than the inhospitable claim to traditional authority; as Whooley explains, “The crux of their position was to deny the public’s (and by extension, the legislatures’) capability to judge medical knowledge. Their hierarchical view of knowledge held that medical knowledge could emanate legitimately only from within the ranks of regular physicians.”⁵⁸

The Exception: Mental Health and State Support

If medicine’s quest for state support had not looked quixotic in the first third of the century, this “era of reasonably friendly relations and close ties among doctors, lawyers, and the state came to an abrupt end about 1830, as ordinary lay people began to fear what they perceived to be growing concentrations of power in what was supposed to be an egalitarian republic” (DL, 87). In no small part due to the regulars’ aggressive, and sometimes arrogant, advocacy of “heroic” and dangerous treatments, nearly three quarters of all medical journals founded around midcentury “were affiliated with less-prestigious specialties or highly contested medical schools.” Orthodox medicine was challenged on all sides by homeopaths (who “espoused, among other novel ideas, the practice of not killing patients with treatment”), eclectics, Thompsonian herbalists, botanists, hydropaths, and other sects, all of whom demanded equal standing under the

⁵⁸ Owen Whooley, *Knowledge in the Time of Cholera: The Struggle Over American Medicine in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2013), 67.

law.⁵⁹ And, in the Jacksonian assault on market regulation, they were granted this recognition by 1840, when virtually every state repealed its licensure laws; only three states retained even the most gestural stipulations on legitimate practice.⁶⁰ All doctors – no matter how sophisticated their bedside manner, or how clearly cracked their favored cures – became equals under the law.

There was, however, an exception to the widespread deregulation of the antebellum market for medical services: the discipline of mental health, or what became known as “Asylum medicine.” According to David Rothman’s influential *The Discovery of the Asylum*,

Jacksonian Americans experienced a crisis of confidence in the social organization of the new republic, fearful that the ties that once bound citizens together – the ties of community, church, and family – were loosening and that, as a consequence, social disorganization appeared imminent. Their fears were confirmed and exacerbated by the extent of the crime, poverty, delinquency, and insanity that they saw around them. In response to these perceptions, to an anxiety about the stability of the social order and an alarm about the extent of social deviancy and dependency, they discovered the solution of the asylum.⁶¹

In 1841, the antebellum era’s most impactful mental health reformer, Dorothea Dix, began aggressively campaigned local, state, and federal bodies for the creation of new, publicly-funded mental hospitals: “There is,” she wrote, “but one alternative – condemn your needy citizens to become the life-long victims of a terrible disease, or provide

⁵⁹ Abbott, *System*, 20.

⁶⁰ John S. Haller, *Medical Protestants: The Eclectics in American Medicine, 1825-1939* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1994), 16.

⁶¹ David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2002 [1971]), xxxiv. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text as DA.

remedial care in a State Hospital.”⁶² Dix’s muckraking and rabble-rousing efforts were remarkably successful: “The most tax-conscious assemblyman found it difficult to stand up against this overwhelming chorus. One after another, the states approved the necessary funds for erecting asylums” (DA, 133). Between 1810 and 1850, public asylums sprang up, dandelion-like. Each asylum was governed by a superintendent, and these superintendents “became the intermediaries between the state and the insane” (DA, xxxvi). Installed in, and granted virtually free reign over, these new public asylums, superintendents came close to achieving Rush’s vision of medical-professional omnipotence. In sum, Rothman writes, “The physicians’ expertise and power to heal legitimized their, but only their, exercise of authority. The doctor in charge, as [Robert] Castel puts it, was a kind of philosopher-king, a position that at once sanctioned and contained the exercise of unbridled discretion. The doctor’s despotism was confined to the mad in the asylum and as such did not contaminate the exercise of power in the civil society” (DA, xxxvi).

Literary Professionalism

The supernovas of eighteenth-century British criticism – Addison’s *Spectator* and Steele’s *Tattler* – took an amateur approach predicated on personal mobility, fiscal and occupational disinterestedness, promiscuous adventurousness, cultivated taste, and broad learning. Such a gentleman-critic was bound neither by the division of labor nor the demands of some discipline or other. In this essentially aristocratic conception, writes

⁶² Dorothea Dix, *Memorial Soliciting a State Hospital for the Insane, Submitted to the Legislature of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Isaac Ashmead, 1845), 45.

Terry Eagleton, “The critic, as cultural strategist rather than literary expert, must resist specialization... Such amateurism is not ignorance or half-capacity, but the casual polymorphous expertise of one to whom no sector of cultural life is alien.”⁶³ In the first decades of the nineteenth century, a school of critics – spearheaded by John Wilson in Britain and Lewis Gaylord Clark in New York – clung to this increasingly anachronistic ideal of belletristic amateurism; but their affectations of shabby gentility had no appeal for large swathes of an increasingly massified audience comprising readers from all (or at least, significantly more than before) walks of life.

As I have tried to show, the rise of modern conceptions of expertise, between 1840-1860, was shadowed and countervailed by a persistent tendency to resist that ideology, inherited from Jacksonian democracy and the longer tradition of republican amateurism. But, as Eagleton suggests, this republican mode of fluid and promiscuous engagement with all aspects of culture and society “is the mark of a non-specialism which is perhaps only in part intelligible to us today, predating as it does that intellectual division of labor to which our own amateurisms are inevitably reactive.”⁶⁴ If our understanding of modern professionalism, the new shapes and spaces carved by the intellectual division of labor, is impoverished without the background of democratic openness and scientific flatness, it is even harder to understand literary studies’ current impulse to generalism, openness, and amateurism without the context of intellectual specialization, the overwhelming pressure of finding one’s niche in the marketplace of ideas. Greg Daniels explains, “as the gentleman amateur had been the prototype of the

⁶³ Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984), 18, 22.

⁶⁴ Eagleton, *Function of Criticism*, 22.

man of science in the eighteenth century, by the mid-nineteenth century the trained specialist – the professional whose sole source of support was his scientific employment – had come to be the new type.”⁶⁵ According to Burton Bledstein, “Americans after 1870, but beginning after 1840, committed themselves to a culture of professionalism which over the years has established the thoughts, habits, and responses most modern Americans have taken for granted.”⁶⁶

Since the 1980s, a welcome wave of scholarship has sought to place U.S. authors in the interconnected contexts of the division of labor, the development of mass culture, the tensions of social class, and the commodification of literature. Almost unanimously, critics who approach this complicated nexus of market forces in the terms of literary professionalism trace the genealogy of their own work back to William Charvat. In Charvat’s historical narrative, the concept of *professional author* became possible after 1820, when infrastructural stagnation gave way to rapid advances in print technology, transportation and distribution networks, and the explosive growth of the reading public. These transformations were, however, by no means *guarantees* of professional accomplishment; in Charvat’s sense, “The terms of professional writing are these: that it provides a living for the author, like any other job; that it is a main and prolonged, rather than intermittent or sporadic, resource for the writer; that it is produced with the hope of

⁶⁵ Daniels, *American Science*, 34.

⁶⁶ Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976), 80.

extended sale in the open market, like any article of commerce; and that it is written with reference to buyers' tastes and reading habits."⁶⁷

So, for Charvat, professional writing means, first and foremost, *writing for a living*: literature must provide the author's sole (or at least primary) source of income. To gain a living by writing, then, the author is forced to craft the kinds of literary commodities a wide audience might want to consume. However, for Charvat, the professional writer must also write for himself (professional aspirants in Charvat's sense were overwhelmingly male), or *for the very sake of writing*. Professionalism, then, combines both senses of vocation: the writer is called to write, but the writer must also get paid. The "mass poet," who "writes primarily to exploit a market... is on that account excluded from history" (PAA, 108). Charvat is concerned, in other words, solely with "those writers for whom both art and income were matters of concern, and whose work, accordingly, revealed the often conflicting pressures of the will to create and the need of the buying public" (PAA, 7-8). Charvat's definition finally forces him to conclude that James Fenimore Cooper was the "*only* commercially successful writer of belles-lettres up to 1850" (PAA, 68).

This all-but-unified trend of professional failure has led Leon Jackson to "question the validity of a study of the profession of authorship... that finds only *one* professional author in the first fifty of its seventy years of coverage."⁶⁸ In *The Business of Letters*, Jackson mounts a sustained and withering assault on Charvat's idea of

⁶⁷ William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1968), 3. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text as PAA.

⁶⁸ Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 15.

professional authorship for “its abstract and anachronistic, if not downright ahistorical, nature. When professional authorship is defined in terms as restrictive as Charvat’s, the literary history of the early national and antebellum periods will always seem like a narrative of repeated failure to attain professional status” (Jackson, BL, 15). Jackson argues that “the paradigm of professionalization studies... was fundamentally flawed in conception, and... has now outlasted any heuristic or collateral value it might once have had... Charvat and others suppose that all authors at all times have sought to maximize their utility through professionalization and competitive engagement in the literary market, or they have explained failures to behave in this way as a consequence of exogenous factors that have stood in the way of such behavior” (Business, 1-2, 38). Jackson urges us to abandon the idea that antebellum authors either tried their damndest (and almost always failed) to get rich, or mourned the obstacles that kept them from trying to get rich in the first place. Jackson is, I think, spot on in observing that “the *idea* of professionalism, as Charvat understood it, hardly existed in the 1820s” (Jackson, BL, 20). According to Charvat’s criteria, literary professionalism existed as a normative ideal *at best* – an aspirational castle in the sky, the object of writerly daydreams. Compounding this, Charvat provides only the flimsiest of grounds on which to differentiate a *profession* from any other occupational category. It seems at least ungenerous to claim that no “mass poet” made “art” a “matter of concern.” Writing poetry has never been anyone’s best bet for accumulating raw capital.

Jackson’s basic metacritical gambit is that professionalism should be driven from the critical-historical field; he argues “that the economics of authorship in the early national and antebellum periods were so complex and tangled, and the concepts of

amateur and professional as used by scholars today so crude and lacking in interpretive nuance, that [sic] work in this field would be best served by avoiding such terms altogether” (Jackson BL, 22). While it is certainly not *necessary* for critics to apply “the concepts of amateur and professional” to the study of literature, acknowledging contingency is not the same as conceding futility. Jackson’s interrogation of the *at least it’s a living!* model of professional authorship is welcome and salutary. Despite its sophisticated critical-theoretical apparatus, Charvat’s is the only account of the professionalism cited in Jackson’s work (with the exception of a brief, and somewhat dismissive, treatment of Weber’s writing on vocations.)

I see no reason to throw the baby of professionalism out with the Charvatian bathwater. Our critical imperative should rather be to bolster the heuristic value of professionalism. We will, then, need a new definition. Before embarking in this direction, I want to make clear what this study is not. It is not an examination of the ways literary texts themselves imagine or “figure” the literary profession. Nor is it an attempt to recover or isolate the existence of a profession of letters in history, though the question of *when professional authorship emerged* has been a source of enduring fascination (and not a little squabbling) within literary criticism. In his exemplary study of *fin de siècle* realism and journalism, *The Labor of Words*, Christopher Wilson suggested that the development of a “fully professionalized style awaited the emergence of a bona fide mass market.”⁶⁹ It is not easy to see why Wilson traces this consecrating moment to the 1880s rather than Cooper’s 1820s or Louis A. Godey’s 1840s. An 1847 article in *Fraser’s* feted Samuel Johnson (dead by 1785) as the “first professional author – the first who, by dint

⁶⁹ Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: Georgia UP, 1985), 16.

of courage and ability, kept himself free from the slavery of a booksellers' hack, and free from the still worse slavery of attendance on the great. He sought his subsistence in public patronage, not in dedications to men of rank" – a sense of professionalism, it bears mentioning, that looks very much like Charvat's.⁷⁰ Finally, I am not suggesting that Melville, Poe, and Delany were or were not professional authors, in any rigorous sense of the term; nor, for that matter. I am not even suggesting that they were *experts* or *masters*; after all, I wasn't there to watch them work.

My focus, instead, is on three related aspects of the texts of Poe, Melville, and Delany: first, hostility toward and critique of establishments, institutions, opposed parties, and individual enemies; second, the attempt to create what I call *expertise effects*, textual embodiments of special access or competence, markers that provide evidence of special knowledge *without revealing the contents of that knowledge*; and finally, the logic of professionalization – or, better still, the felt experience of *professionalizing pressures* and, just as decisively, *professional disappointment*.

For the sake of convenience more than rigor, these three aspects can be glossed in Weberian terms as (1) dismantling traditional and rational forms of authority, (2) attempting to cultivate authority through charisma, whether personal or (representationally) impersonal, and (3) the duties, pleasures, and frustrations inherent in vocational calling. The hermeneutic advantage of this relatively inclusive, but also clearly bounded, methodological approach is that it allows for close attention to rhetoric, aesthetic, and, for lack of a better term, ideology. It is also generically inclusive, allowing

⁷⁰ George Henry Lewes, "The Condition of Authors in England, Germany, and France," *Frazer's Magazine* 35 (1847), 285-95, 286.

for the interplay and counterpoint of pointed critique, personal fantasy, charismatic performance, and genuine vocational pursuit.

This constellation of critique, charisma, and vocation offers an inclusive, *but not universalizing*, perspective on literature and cultural production, and provides a kind of (purely pragmatic) coherence to an otherwise motley collection of authors and texts. (The ideal of universal experience, Dana Nelson reminds us, is born afflicted with the ideological fantasy of transcendent white manhood.) Such a schema might include those writers Mary Kelley designates “literary domestics” without ignoring the *ambivalence* Kelley sees as deeply imbricated in their vocational experience.⁷¹ I hope to show, too, that the disciplinary boundaries between “American Literature” and “African-American Literature” remain much less porous than is necessary (or salutary for either). Many (particularly New England) authors are excluded simply for their resolutely anti-professional understanding of the vocation of authorship. For all his hostility to authority and projections of mastery, for instance, Emerson is excluded on the grounds that he “preferred to define himself in broad terms, as a scholar, and in his studies he cultivated a new amateurism, taking all the arts and sciences as his territory.”⁷² Indeed, I hope to challenge Meredith McGill’s influential argument that studies focused on the category of “the author” all-but-inevitably smuggle in a the binocular perspective of literary nationalism: “Even when they show how antebellum authors internalize a sense of their peripheral cultural status,” author-based studies “are able to discern little place for

⁷¹ Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984), vii-xviii.

⁷² Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture from Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 61.

literature outside of the nationalist frame of reference.”⁷³ But the substance of this challenge to the reduction of author and nation is drawn in no small part from McGill’s laserlike focus on the particularity of markets, regions, and periods.

I am, in other words, entirely persuaded by the great lessons of the cultural-critical humanities after deconstruction: the non-identity of persons, the fluidity and constructedness of gender and race, the performativity of gender and racial roles, the inescapable specificity of gendered and racialized experiences, and the artificial and totalizing nature of national boundedness and nation-state boundaries. I feel no need to prove these points again by adjudicating the conservative, progressive, or radical bona fides of texts and authorial personas.

Defining the abstract concept of “profession” is notoriously difficult – attempts to do so, generally unsatisfying. Here, as in most things, essentialism is as seductive as it is distracting. If “the regulation of abstract knowledge, and thus expert labour, is common to all societies,” Rosemary Crompton suggested, then ““professionals’ should not be regarded as being in a distinctive category separate from other experts.”⁷⁴ Laurence Veysey found it “best simply to give up the effort abstractly to define the term *professional*,” understanding the professions, instead, “as nothing more than a series of rather random occupations that have historically been called that in our own culture” – though with the curious caveat that “one should not forget that poets do not seem to

⁷³ Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 79.

⁷⁴ Rosemary Crompton, “Professions in the Current Context,” *Work, Employment & Society*, Special Issue (May, 1990): 147-66.

require the label *professional*, even though they have developed a skill with words certainly equal to that of lawyers.⁷⁵

It is worth reiterating that the meaning of expertise is not any less historically specific; there is no Platonic form of expertise, or at least, not one accessible to merely mortal literary critics. The concept is protean, shifty, and relational: “claims concerning the essential nature of expertise cannot be sustained,” according to Christopher Winch, and the attempt to construct “a general theory of expertise” invites House of Usher-ish collapse. Accordingly, Winch advocates a strategy of understanding expertise by “appreciating its variety rather than by looking for what is common to all cases.”⁷⁶

With Winch’s caveat in mind, I argue that the writers covered in this study shared a number of the felt imperatives broadly characteristic of their era’s professionalizing movements, which can be summed up, in broad strokes, by two desires: desire for the right, opportunity, and skill necessary to manufacture, market, and profit from specialized commodities; the desire for a lay-audience hungry to consume those commodities, and willing to subjugate its own instincts to the superior judgment of the author. In her foundational study, *The Rise of the Professions*, Magali Larson identifies modern professionalism as the project “by which producers of special services sought to constitute *and control* a market for their expertise.”⁷⁷ After establishing a market, the

⁷⁵ Lawrence R. Veysey, “Higher Education as a Profession: Changes and Discontinuities,” in *The Professions in American History* ed. Nathan O. Hatch (Notre Dame UP, 1988), 17-18.

⁷⁶ Christopher Winch, *Dimensions of Expertise: A Conceptual Exploration of Vocational Knowledge* (London: Continuum, 2010), 135.

⁷⁷ Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: Monopolies of Competence and Sheltered Markets* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013 [1977]), xvi. Further citations will be given in the text as (TRP).

profession's second objective was "to gain special status for their members and give them respectability" (TRP, 8). This sought-after professional legitimacy depends on both peer acceptance and the indulgence of the public at large. In sum, nineteenth-century professionalization was "an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources – special knowledge and skills – into another – social and economic rewards" (TRP, xvii).

This professional project included both the urges of naked capitalism and a series of constitutively ambivalent mechanisms that *resisted* laissez faire market pressures. "Professional entrepreneurs, not unlike their counterparts in industry," she argues, were "bound to solicit state protection and state-enforced penalties against unlicensed competitors – that is to say, those producers of services whose training and entry into the market they had not controlled" (TRP, 14). Along with the imperatives to market control and elevated group status, Larson identifies three "traditional or pre capitalist components," anti-market "*residues*," in professional ideology: first, "a work ethic derived from ideals of craftsmanship, which finds *intrinsic* value in work and is expressed in the notion of vocation or *calling*"; second, "the ideal of universal service," most often patterned on the genteel "model of gentlemanly disinterestedness"; and finally, "a secularized version of the feudal notion of noblesse oblige" (TRP, 220).

This deposits us a long way from Charvat's relatively straightforward association of professionalism and economic self-sufficiency. If there is a logic uniting the texts I examine here, it is the insistence on performing negative critique and positive fantasy – often in uncomfortably close proximity – out of a (felt or projected) sense of *duty*. The unifying affect, then, is *ambivalence*: ambivalence toward the market, ambivalence toward the audience, and anxiety over the very legitimacy of authorship. This is less a

matter of knowledge, or rational persuasion, than on what passes (or fails to pass) for knowledge. I find Michael Warner's explanation of the mechanisms organizing liberal print culture helpful, here:

Success in this game is not a matter of having better arguments or more complex positions. It is a matter of uptake, citation, and recharacterization. It takes place not in closely argued essays but in an informal, intertextual, and multigeneric field. There is no reason why intellectuals should be specially positioned for public address in this sense, except where they are packaged as experts. And expert knowledge is in an important way nonpublic: its authority is external to the discussion. It can be challenged only by other experts, not within the discourse of the public itself.⁷⁸

If nothing else, expertise effects come to serve as rhetorical trump cards – *uptake hacks*, you might call them. If the legitimacy of the author's expertise were recognized by the layreader, the non-expert audience member, the author became much more likely to wield influence over that reader. Poe, Melville, and Delany developed and deployed arsenals of techniques, sometimes to foster their own legitimacy or mastery, and sometimes to ironize or obliterate somebody else's. This is a study of those arsenals.

In my first chapter, "The Abduction of Edgar Allan Poe," I examine a certain strain of development in Poe's prose, in three rough stages. First, I briefly consider Poe's early criticism as an exercise in what Michael Allen calls "expert style." The components of expert style – broad erudition, esoteric penetration, and the exposure of charlatans – were intended to foster an avant garde literary community, under the aegis of authority (Poe), in opposition to the popular literary "mob" of uncomprehending dupes and unregenerate quacks. Poe's mid-career tales, increasingly taken by critics to be "hoaxes," can better be understood as performances of the relationship between author and audience

⁷⁸ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 145.

imagined in Poe's earlier journalism. The awed narrator of Poe's detective stories, I argue, takes up the position of the expert's lay-audience. With unwavering credulity, the narrator depicts C. Auguste Dupin's investigative technique, which he calls "analysis," as the preternatural ability to "disentangle" *effects into causes* – a fully functional mastery of the endlessly interconnected natural universe no less than the hopelessly jumbled social field. In tales of madness like "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse," on the other hand, nameless criminals narrate their confessions, placing us, Poe's readers, in the uncomfortable dual-position of trial juror and judge: even as we adjudicate the narrator's sanity, we are forced to evaluate his insights – presented with all the weight of natural science and phrenology – into human nature. The effect is a kind of vertigo, produced by an alchemical interaction of irony and esoteric certainty. Finally, I turn to the late treatise, *Eureka*, wherein Poe confronts us with a literally prophetic vision of nature and reality. In his own name, Poe combines the roles of expert critic, analytic detective, and mad philosopher; again, the reader is confronted with the need to choose – this time, between the incompatible roles of juror, judge, and credulous disciple. In *Eureka*, finally, Poe serves both as author and as his own awed audience.

My second chapter, "Irony as Expertise: Herman Melville's Shell Game," argues that the characters populating *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* – most often treated, by critics, as avatars of Satan himself – can best be understood as precisely what they seem to be: optimistic reformers, opportunistic neo-professionals, and profit-seeking speculators. Against the pervasive tendency to read *The Confidence-Man* as an echo-chamber of ironic instability and unintelligible myth-syncretism, I want to insist that Melville's difficult last novel constitutes his most sustained engagement with the

sociocultural developments of his day: divided labor, intellectual commodification, and disembedding. Following Karl Polanyi, Anthony Giddens describes disembedding in terms of two “abstract systems.” Where economic exchange becomes mediated through “symbolic tokens” (money), interpersonal familiarity is interrupted by increasing reliance on “expert systems” (professionals). Melville’s narrative strategy reproduces disembedding in textual form. The narrator’s endlessly self-qualifying, often hypothetical descriptions force the reader to make tenuous interpretive judgments based on insufficient evidence. Placing confidence in any character constitutes a risky investment, and may lead to an outright swindle: the herb doctor and the Philosophical Intelligence Officer invoke the palliative powers of science in order to exploit their ostensible victims’ vulnerabilities; the man with the book solicits speculation in a dubious joint-stock company; the Black Guinea may be neither black nor disabled. And yet, for all that, the narrative never provides evidence that any character has been diddled or defrauded. As the mediating point between the reader and the text’s relentless abstraction, the narrator is both the book’s only potentially credible authority, and the sole source of its evidence. We are at the mercy of his mastery over the world he describes, but he refuses to describe that world straightforwardly. In a strange way, then, *The Confidence-Man* is Melville’s most *professionalized work*: the addled reader’s inescapable reliance on an aloof, indifferent narrator corresponds precisely to the relationship between doctor and patient, sinner and cleric, investor and financial advisor. By the end of his career as an aspiring literary professional, then, Melville evinces a rigorous skepticism about the possibility of professional legitimacy. Fittingly, after *The Confidence-Man*, Melville retreated to the genteel amateurism of privately circulated poetry manuscripts.

Finally, I analyze Martin Delany's pseudo-apocalyptic picaresque of unrealized slave insurrection, *Blake: Or, the Huts of America*, in terms of its eponymous protagonist's mastery over what he calls the "secret" of black "organization," which implies a plan for the general insurrection of slaves in the south. While critics generally see this secret as Delany's attempt to cultivate moral panic at the possibility of slave insurrection, I argue, in my third chapter, "Democracy and Charismatic Authority in *Blake*," that this secret of *organization* is, rather, Blake's managerial acumen, the ends of which are ultimately bureaucratic rather than revolutionary. Blake's access to this secret is predicated less on knowledge than on charisma, and less on a facility for rational argument than on a preternatural ability to persuade through a kind of mesmeric suggestion. Though he has shown Blake meticulously sowing the seeds of revolution, Delany's narrator conspicuously occludes the violent insurrection seemingly demanded by the book's first half. Instead, at the novel's midpoint, Delany shifts the setting to Cuba, where, in the circumscribed bounds of the island community, Blake is able to magnetize followers into a centralized black clerisy, a rank-and-file hierarchy of resistance fighters. Their resistance, though, is deployed not through violent conflict but through discipline, hierarchy, and atomized specialization. In *Blake*, the creation of a competent class under the guidance of a charismatic leader is imagined as finally more revolutionary than any single act of revolutionary violence. So, Blake becomes Delany's harbinger, not of race war, but of corporate competition between the authoritarian, ramshackle white monopoly and an imminent, better-organized, better-disciplined black administration. Thus, the novel reflects Delany's frustration with the vast scope of the problem of racial subjugation in the United States, and his fantasy of solving that problem through the

proliferation of a competitive black professional class, which would be evolved from the primordial potential of a delimited community under the thrall of his own galvanizing charm.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ABDUCTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE: FROM RIGOROUS CONNOISSEURSHIP TO INTUITIVE MASTERY IN POE'S PROSE

Like a good many deft rhetoricians, Edgar Allan Poe's projection of expertise – our sense that he knows what he is talking about – depends less on the dissemination of knowledge than on the successful representation of knowledge possessed. More persuader than educator, more self-publicist than popularizer, Poe is generally indifferent to making the esoteric accessible; his trick – or, at least, his goal – is to make sure we think *he* has access to the esoteric. Of course, this description is itself more argumentative than explanatory; it might purport to get to the bottom of things, to lift the curtain and reveal the wizard, but it actually produces something new, or at least different. It lives by uptake – the extent to which it is accepted, adopted, or even refuted; it dies by being dismissed or ignored. In the core of what follows, then, I consider one complex problem – how (and why) does Poe project, or at least endeavor to project, the impression of his own expertness? – from the perspectives of three sequential, if obviously overlapping, phases in his career.

Schematically and diachronically, the chapter maps onto Poe's early criticism, his mid-period tales of ratiocination, and his late, intergeneric, speculative ruminations on the structure of cosmos and mind. In his savage early reviews, Poe attempts to vindicate his own poetic productions by allocating nearly all discursive power in a kind of criticism that increasingly cloaks the gustatory judgments of the connoisseur in a rhetoric of

logical rigor (which isn't at all synonymous with a logically rigorous method). As he finds his footing around 1840, Poe formulates a deceptively simple pseudo-system, a kind of universal logic, predicated on an idiosyncratic conception of critical "analysis" and imaginative "composition" as the inverse (and readily reversible) operations of a single mental faculty. Though this bivalent principle is the crown jewel of his philosophy and methodology (to the extent that he truly had either), Poe rarely explores its potential limitations in his essays, opting instead to expose the gears and pinwheels in the voices of the unreliable, eminently unbelievable narrators of his tales of detection and perversion. The mask of fiction freed him up to critique, ironize, and sometimes undermine the universalism implied by journalistic claims of hyper-competence. Late Poe rehearses but reverses these earlier concerns by investing discursive power in authors by exposing the poetic origins of scientific discovery. In his final years, that is, Poe supplemented his quasi-rigorous method of analysis with an anti-rational, if not precisely mystical, concept of *intuition* – a kind of revelatory apparatus that produced authoritative knowledge without reference to tradition. Intuition, that is, generates thoughts that do not follow from what has been thought before, but seem in themselves entirely authoritative. Ultimately, Poe argues that all genuine breakthroughs in thought, no matter how scientific they seem in retrospect, are *poetic* in their origins.

This chapter, then, explores what I take to be Poe's complex strategies of literary expertise, which can, I think, best be understood in terms of a broad project of literary professionalization. Less a five-year plan than a fantasy, Poe's professionalizing project was by no means unambiguous, and frequently countervailed by pessimistic, even anti-professional, sentiments (some adopted deliberately and some anxiously, if not

unconsciously). In broad diachronic strokes, my argument is that Poe figures, as well as any other antebellum writer, the drive toward legitimacy, prestige, and legal protection that could only be achieved through the establishment and ascendancy of a literary association (which is tantamount to saying a literary profession) on the basis of shared principles, imperatives, and ambitions. Unfortunately for Poe, this ambition would, by the turn of the century, be realized in the separate streams of literary scholarship in the expanding academy (the professor's profession) and, less triumphally, in the newly "objective" practice of journalism.⁷⁹

If the logic of professionalization goes some way toward explaining Poe's conversion from amateurish critical connoisseur into a proto-professional, quasi-scientific critic, as well as his status as the pioneer of nearly every conceivable genre of formula fiction, I don't mean to suggest that Poe was a professional in any essential sense, or that he had a clear plan for professional literature. Professionalization is, after all, in no small part an exercise in wish fulfillment, and Poe is not renowned for the stability of his fantasy life. Any amateur can become competent through study and training; only the professional has been forged in the baptismal fire of institutional ritual: examination,

⁷⁹ The best single-volume account of literary studies' academic professionalization in the United States is Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1987]); for a focused account of the conflict between scientific philology and belletristic generalism, see Michael Warner's "Professionalization and the Rewards of Literature: 1875-1900," *Criticism* 27.1 (Winter 1985), 1-28. The classic account of journalistic objectivity's roots in 1830s American publishing is Michael Schudson's *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), esp. 4-31. Though the vast debate surrounding Schudson's account is beyond the scope of this essay, a good overview and rejoinder is Richard Kaplan's "The Origins of Objectivity in American Journalism," *The Routledge Companion to New and Journalism Studies* ed. Stuart Allan (New York: Routledge 2009), 25-37. For the striking absence of journalism from professionalization studies in the social sciences, see Stephen A. Banning, "The Professionalization of Journalism," *Journalism History* 24.4 (Winter 98), 157-164.

credentials, and licensure. But what of status-claims that have not (yet) been monopolized by a competent community? With typical nimbleness, Erving Goffman observes,

Claims to be a law graduate can be established as valid or invalid, but claims to be a friend, a true believer, or a music-lover can be confirmed or disconfirmed only more or less. Where standards of competence are not objective, and where *bona fide* practitioners are not collectively organized to protect their mandate, an individual may style himself an expert and be penalized by nothing stronger than sniggers.⁸⁰

While should by no means underestimate the force of contempt, and the avoidance of shame, in shaping behavior, it is interesting to reflect that fear of “sniggers” is the strongest disincentive against me declaring, for example, that I am a poet of profound genius, unconscionably neglected by the world. People who claim to be poets tend to seem boorish; people who *are* poets are cagey or evasive (not to say poetical) about it. Poe could be both.

Even before the untimely and mysterious death of antebellum America’s leading purveyor of hypnagogic lyrics and doppelgänger yarns, readers had conjured up enough Poeish specters to fill a Whitman catalogue. As Scott Peeples points out, in his invaluable study of Poe’s critical “afterlife,” this critical taxonomy tells us less about “who Poe was” than it does about “what ‘Poe’ is” (and, we might add, what critics want him to be).⁸¹ Timothy H. Scherman offers a useful heuristic for mapping the relationship between Poe’s rhetorical self-projections and his many, variously divergent and overlapping, receptions:

Famous as he is today for the evanescent ‘readerly’ sensations generated in his tales of horror and ratio native intrigue, his work would be all but forgotten were it not for his expertise in creating – out of,

⁸⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 60-61.

⁸¹ Scott Peeples, *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004), ix.

effectively, ‘nothing’ – an ‘authority effect’ in the cultural field... Once Poe had established through various stylistic and rhetorical manoeuvres the quasi-holographic projection of himself... he could do little to control the progress of that projection, or what I have called here his ‘authority effect.’⁸²

The “authority effect” neatly suggests both Poe’s specific contribution to the enterprise of his reception – the impression of his virtually *ex nihilo* “expertise” – and the swiftness with which this specificity was buried in the avalanche of praise and blame, imitation and recrimination.⁸³

Two hundred years of Poe’s cultural centrality have conspired to ensure that even a study dead-set on delegitimizing individual centrality as an organizing principle of literary history will have little choice but to use Poe himself to illustrate the point. As Wimsatt and Brooks put it, “It is possible to rate Poe up or down. It is difficult to avoid him.”⁸⁴ Poe had a “seductive influence on great writers,” as exhaustively demonstrated by Burton R. Pollin; but, then again, Pollin’s judgment begs the question of which writers count as “great.” In a sense, the begging of the question is more critically interesting than

⁸² Timothy H. Scherman, “The Authority Effect: Poe and the Politics of Reputation in the Pre-Industry of American Publishing” *Arizona Quarterly* 49.3 (Fall 1993): 1-19, 3, 14.

⁸³ While Scherman is largely confines his scope to Poe’s lifetime, there is no principled reason not to extend the heuristic’s temporal range. Scott Peeples does just this, under the aegis of “what might be called ‘the Poe effect,’ the creation and maintenance of Poe’s image, the various ways this image interacts with popular culture and with Poe’s writing” (Peeples, *Afterlife*, 126). Shoshana Felman takes a very different path (a Lacanian analysis of Poe’s verse and critical reception) to a similar destination (Poe’s inescapability) in her account of “the Poe-etic effect,” or, in other words, the tendency of Poe’s poetry to produce “a *genius effect*: the impression of some undeniable but compelling *force* to which the reader is subjected... There is something about Poe’s poetry which, like fate, is experienced as *inevitable*, unavoidable (and not just as irresistible).” Felman, “On Reading Poetry,” *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. J.P. Muller and W.J. Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1980]): 133-56, 134, 135.

⁸⁴ William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 480.

the judgment itself, since canon-formation is, we might say, a series of variously indelicate attempts to answer the question, *which authors belong in the canon?* while studiously evading or polemically bulldozing the question, *on what grounds?* In 1994, Joyce Carol Oates asked, “Who has not been influenced by Poe?”⁸⁵ A half-century earlier, T.S. Eliot, cautious as a prairie dog, had answered: “one cannot be sure that one's own writing has not been influenced by Poe.”⁸⁶ Taking a measure of Poe's influence on literary history, popular culture, and the elite profession of criticism is like accounting for the influence of nitrogen on everyday life: it is as omnipresent as it is easy to disavow, everywhere and nowhere, holding the air itself together or doing precisely nothing; at certain depths, it becomes narcotic; too deep, it is toxic.⁸⁷

There are perhaps as many Poes as there are critical accounts of Poe, but it is instructive, if reductive, to group the portraits into the two camps captured in the title of Stuart Levine's 1972 study, *Edgar Poe: Seer and Craftsman*.⁸⁸ As a seer/visionary, Poe can readily be credited with the demi-divine faculty of origination – of being first, marking the break, inaugurating the new in history. Poe's work and thought has been diagnosed as the originary fount for a dizzying variety of technical innovations, literary genres, and even schools of thought; such diagnoses have been countered by less

⁸⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, “Afterword: Reflections on the Grotesque,” in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (New York: Plume Books, 1994), 305.

⁸⁶ T.S. Eliot, “From Poe to Valéry,” in *The Hudson Review* 2.3 (Fall 1949), 327-342, 327.

⁸⁷ For Poe's inestimable influence on “world literature,” for lack of a better term, see *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, ed. Lois Vines (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999) and its spiritual sequel, *Poe's Pervasive Influence*, ed. Barbara Cantalupo (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh UP, 2012). For accounts of Poe's impact on figures and subjects as diverse as Federico Fellini, David Fincher, and The Simpsons, see *Adapting Poe: Re-imaginings in Popular Culture*, ed. Dennis R. Perry and Carl H. Sederholm (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁸⁸ Stuart Levine, *Edgar Poe: Seer and Craftsman* (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards 1972).

enthusiastic, and often less sympathetic, critics who see Poe as a derivative or relatively minor footnote in the history of thought and art.⁸⁹ This pattern – fervent affirmations of Poe’s originality crashing against the rocks of equally fervent, if unimpressed, protestations of Poe’s uninspired, derivative artifice – holds for virtually every notable aspect of Poe’s career. For the Poe-positive W.H. Auden, “His portraits of abnormal or self-destructive states contributed much to Dostoevski, his ratiocinating hero is the ancestor of Sherlock Holmes and his many successors, his tales of the future lead to H.G. Wells, his adventure stories to Jules Verne and Stevenson.”⁹⁰ If he did not steal it from Sophocles, Voltaire, Henry Fielding, Eugène François Vidocq, or Honoré de Balzac, then Poe almost certainly created the detective story.⁹¹ If he did not invent Anglophone Gothic fiction, he was at least the first to “excel in” and to “formulate a thorough and convincing theory of the Gothic,” or so argues George E. Haggerty.⁹² Seminal SF historian Hugo

⁸⁹ At the extreme end of this oppositional limb, Harold Bloom sits almost alone: “Emerson fathered pragmatism; Poe fathered precisely nothing, which is the way he would have wanted it.” “Inescapable Poe,” in *Poetics of Influence*, ed. John Hollander (New Haven: H.R. Schwab, 1988): 279-95, 284.

⁹⁰ W.H. Auden, “Introduction to Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry,” in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1966), 220-30.

⁹¹ Scholarship on the contested history of the detective story’s origin is vast, but for good overviews, see Heather Worthington’s account of the influence of *Blackwood’s*-style proto-detection in *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth Century Popular Fiction* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and John Samuel Harpham’s border-crossing theoretical account of crime’s intellectual appeal in “Detective Fiction and the Aesthetic of Crime,” *Raritan*, 34.1 (2014): 121-141. The classic studies of detective fiction’s archetypal or mythic structure include John G. Cawelti’s *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories As Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and John T. Irwin’s *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

⁹² George E. Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 81. For a good overview, see Benjamin Franklin Fisher, “Poe and the Gothic Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002): 72–91. For accounts of Poe’s European influences, see e.g. Gustav Gruener, “Notes on the Influence of E.T.A. Hoffmann Upon Edgar Allan Poe” *PMLA* 19.1 (1904): 1–25; Maurice Lévy, “Poe and the Gothic Tradition” *ESQ* 18.1 (1972): 19-29; and Marshall Brown, “Three Theses on Gothic Fiction,” *The Gothic Text* (Stanford UP, 2005), 1-7.

Gernsback early on affirmed Poe's status as "the father of 'scientifiction.' It was he who really originated the romance, cleverly weaving into and around the story, a scientific thread."⁹³

Critical enthusiasm for Poe-the-originator can sometimes obscure the vital countertradition of craftsmanship: the critical habit of casting Poe as the self-directed star of a whiz-bang variety show, a *theater of the effect*, cobbled together from prefab sets, chintzy props, Foley thunder, and (above all) smoke and mirrors. "Some critics," as Richard Wilbur notes, "have refused to see any substance... in Poe's fiction, and have regarded his tales as nothing more than complicated machines for saying 'boo.'"⁹⁴ D.H. Lawrence saw Poe's robotic style as a transparent symptom of his robotic soul: "The absence of real central or impulsive being in him leaves him inordinately, mechanically sensitive to sounds and effects, associations of sounds, associations of rhyme, for example – mechanical, facile, having no root in any passion."⁹⁵ Harry Levin emphasizes the monological quality of Poe's cross-genre narrative persona, which evokes for him "the patter of a stage magician, adept at undermining our incredulity with a display of

⁹³ Hugo Gernsback, "A New Sort of Magazine," in *Science-Fiction: The Gernsback Years: A Complete Coverage of the Genre Magazines from 1926 Through 1936*, ed. E.F. Bleiler and Richard Bleiler (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1998), 544. A similar, and no less influential, view on Poe's pioneering work in science fiction is Harold Beaver's introduction to his edition of *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), vii – xxi. See also Burton R. Pollin's "Poe: The 'Virtual' Inventor, Practitioner, and Inspirer of Modern Science Fiction," in *Poe Messenger*, 26.1 (1996), 18-45. Ironically, given his title, John Tresch demotes Poe from "inventor" to "discoverer" in "Extra! Extra! Poe invents science fiction!" in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge, 2002), 113-32.

⁹⁴ Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," Library of Congress Anniversary Lecture (1959), reprinted in *Edgar Allan Poe: Critical Assessments*, ed. Graham Clarke (East Sussex: Helm Information, 1991), 235.

⁹⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990 [1923]), 83.

sham erudition, scientific pretensions, quotations from occult authorities, and misquotations from foreign languages.”⁹⁶

When twentieth-century critics described Poe as mechanical, mathematical, or overly technical, they typically meant to address his psychological peculiarity. Indeed, the same can be said for Poe’s contemporaries and immediate followers, but in the nineteenth century, the issue was less settled. For many of his early champions, Poe’s formal mastery and technical sophistication was precisely what made him powerful. As one obituary notice put it, “The characteristic of his mind was its wonderful analytical power. This was the great secret of his literary success. He would take a great poem mentally to pieces, just as a mechanician would take to pieces a watch, and thus learn, like the artisan, how to construct a similar one.”⁹⁷ In the 1845 essay that popularized Poe to the literary nationalists of New York, James Russell Lowell hails Poe for his potent admixture of “two of the prime qualities of genius, a faculty of vigorous yet minute analysis, and a wonderful fecundity of imagination” (CH, 163). Even when his tales seem to leap from “the probable into the weird confines of superstition and unreality” – when reason has, to all appearance, ceded the field to chaos – this impression is as concertedly composed as a minuet: “Even his mystery is mathematical to his own mind. To him x is a known quantity all along. In any picture that he paints, he understands the chemical properties of all his colors” (CH, 164).

⁹⁶ Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne Poe Melville* (Chicago: Ohio University Press 1980 [1958]), 135.

⁹⁷ Charles J. Peterson, “Mr Poe’s Last Poem,” *Philadelphia Saturday Gazette*, in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage*, ed. I.M. Walker (London: Routledge, 1997), 320. Further citations from this volume will be given parenthetically in the text as CH.

Three years of miscommunication, frustrated ambitions, and distinctly Poe-ish misbehavior later, Lowell had no further interest in the volunteer position of image consultant to Mr. Poe. Where his essay had rendered Poe's "genius" as the homogenous, fluid solution of "analysis" and "imagination," a jaunty stanza in *A Fable for Critics* (1848), sketches Poe *himself* as the chemical suspension of two rigidly proportioned elements:

There comes Poe, with his Raven, like Barnaby Rudge,
Three fifths of him genius and two fifths sheer fudge,
Who talks like a book of iambs and pentameters,
In a way to make people of common sense damn meters,
Who has written some things quite the best of their kind,
But the heart somehow seems all squeezed out by the mind.⁹⁸

Even as it travesties Poe's fondness for measurable metrics and literary machines, Lowell's quasi-statistical distillation of genius and obscurantist bullshit encapsulates Poe's growing reputation for indifference to (or incomprehension of) exoteric clarity and emotional accessibility. The qualities that had typified Poe's greatest virtues – observational detachment, mathematical precision, analytically-enhanced imagination – are made to look ridiculous, and to make Poe look ridiculous: a gifted, stunted, robotic oddity.⁹⁹

In his infamous obituary, Poe's literary executor Rufus Griswold memorialized Poe as a "dreamer – dwelling in ideal realms – in heaven or hell"; Griswold's Poe,

⁹⁸ James Russell Lowell, *A Fable for Critics: Or Better... a Glance at a Few of Our Literary Progenies* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1848).

⁹⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson pushed this position to an extreme; under the mistaken impression that Poe's grim tale "King Pest" (1835) was a product of its author's tragic decline, Stevenson — no stranger to literary grotesquery — was roused to a morbid affirmation: "He who could write 'King Pest' had ceased to be a human being. For his own sake, and out of an infinite compassion for so lost a spirit, one is glad to think of him as dead." Stevenson, "Poe," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Bloom's Classic Critical Views* (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008), 148.

trapped in his own mind, “walked the streets, in madness or melancholy,” oblivious to and contemptuous of his surroundings (CH, 387, 299). And yet, for all the animus aimed at Poe *personally*, Griswold is actually quite complimentary of the tales and lyrics (he even professes admiration for *Eureka*). But, for Griswold, “as a critic, he was more remarkable as a dissector of sentences than as a commentator upon ideas. *He was little better than a carping grammarian*” (CH, 301, italics in original).¹⁰⁰ After Griswold’s opening salvo, a fusillade of obituaries and exposés aimed to lay bare Poe’s seemingly unworldly nature. Even critics who saw Griswold’s portrait as a character-assassinating caricature tended to share the premise of Poe’s inability to penetrate the *real* world, or to commune with *normal* people. Evert Duyckinck – the figurehead of literary Young America, and Poe’s occasional ally in literary battles – is most often, and not unreasonably, seen as a debunker of Griswold’s scurrilous attacks. That said, in his two reviews of Griswold’s edition of Poe’s works, only the second disputes the mad-dreamer myth. The first – a bracing, single-paragraph enumeration of Poe’s deficiencies – rather amplifies than contravenes Griswold’s appraisal of Poe’s atrophied emotional equipment. But rather than a hot-blooded, Byronic *vates*, Duyckinck’s Poe is an arid formalist, a metronomic meter-beater, a kind of soulless abacus:

His genius was mathematical, rather than pictorial or poetic... His indifference to living, flesh and blood subjects, explains his fondness for the mechanism and music of verse, without reference to the thought or feeling... His instrument is neither an organ nor a harp; he is... a Swiss bell-ringer, who from little contrivances of his own, with an ingeniously devised hammer, strikes a sharp melody, which has all that

¹⁰⁰ After Poe’s death, Lowell would revise his estimate of Poe further, and not for the better: “As a critic, Mr Poe was aesthetically deficient. Unerring in his analysis of dictions, meters, and plots, he seemed wanting in the faculty of perceiving the profounder ethics of art. His criticisms are, however, distinguished for scientific precision and coherence of logic. They have the exactness, and, at the same time, the coldness of mathematical demonstrations... They are especially valuable as illustrating the great truth, too generally overlooked, that analytic power is a subordinate quality of the critic. (CH, 167)

is delightful and affecting, that is attainable without a soul. (CH, 337-38)

When Duyckinck concludes the review by thanking the editors and publishers volume for “wheel[ing] into public view this excellent machine,” it’s impossible to tell if the machine he means is the book, the text, or the author (CH, 338).

Toward a Rigorous Connoisseurship

Poe was no more a gentleman of leisure and letters than his audience was a cross-section of upper-crust gentility; he often complained of the “gentlemen of elegant leisure” who, ensconced in their provincial “cliques,” controlled the American publishing industry (ER, 1003). Vulnerable, and acutely aware of his vulnerability, to the caprices of the market, Poe’s relationship with capital was never more than that of an aspirant to an obstacle. Poe’s endless quest for a living wage depended, in Terence Whalen’s terms, on his ability to “adapt his talents to the unstable and perhaps unfathomable tastes of a distant mass audience.”¹⁰¹ Poe found himself forced to fashion new tools and techniques for relating to – for, literally, establishing relationships between himself and – an abstract readership he could only imagine. But Poe did not simply abandon the ideal of an elite audience; rather, as Whalen argues, “he viewed his texts as split or divided objects – one part containing literary value for the critical taste, the other part containing such matter as would render them profitable to the mass market.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 7.

¹⁰² Whalen, *Masses*, 90-91. For an account of Poe’s place in an antebellum literary market divided into two potential professionalisms – one privileging popularity and wide circulation, the other “a more rarefied vocational model privileging aesthetic autonomy and cultural authority” – see John Evelev, “The Literary Profession,” in *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013), 159.

A new form of literary authority, based on criteria other than class identification, was sorely needed; so critics began to recast the conventions of classicism – wide learning, principled judgment, comfort with any experience or idea – in the crucible of European Romanticism and scientific formalism. What emerged, in the form of critics like Coleridge and Carlyle, was the “tone of the sober intellectual expert, or the philosopher” – a tone that enabled its wielders “to play the role of the philosopher expert rather than that of the gentleman connoisseur of good writing.”¹⁰³ Taking a cue from the “great magazine exponent of the expert role,” Thomas De Quincey, Poe accented his wide-ranging investigations with “a tone of expert knowledge which could hardly be supported by research in the time at the disposal of the journalist” (PBMT, 85-6). Occasionally, Poe also (again like de Quincey) drops “the merest jocular hint to his more educated readers... that his authority is not so absolute as he pretends, but the tenor of his exposition is fundamentally serious and has all the rhetorical appeal of expertise” (PBMT, 86).¹⁰⁴

Poe did not emerge from his cocoon as a full-fledged “intellectual expert.” In his early years as a wage-earning writer, Poe cultivated a critical style I call “rigorous connoisseurship,” a taste-based (which is to say, essentially unprincipled) approach to reading texts. His protestations of fairness, his conspicuous displays of erudition, his

¹⁰³ Michael Allen, *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969), 85, 91. Further citations will be given parenthetically as PBMT.

¹⁰⁴ Here, Allen draws on René Wellek, who diagnosed an “element of bluff and downright charlatanry in De Quincey’s constant promises of elucidation, announcements of profound understanding, and disparagement of all other commentators.” De Quincey’s “display of omniscience, the pontifical tone, the constant self-congratulations, the mysterious hints at enormous hidden knowledge on far away subjects... are not only temperamental failings, but must be explained by conformity to the tone of the magazines for which De Quincey wrote and the hopes which he had to raise in editors and readers.” Wellek, “De Quincey’s Status in the History of Ideas,” *Philological Quarterly* 23 (1944): 248-72, 251, 276.

theatrically indubitable discriminations, and (especially) his ritualistic unmasking of quacks work in conjunction to delimit legitimate and illegitimate practices of literary production. In this section, then, I trace the contours of Poe's critical techniques of authority – a rhetorical quiver of tactical tricks and tropes, each chosen for its potential to engender the impression of a three-tiered literary hierarchy: author-critic, elite reader, and philistine (which is to say, anyone who disagreed with Poe).

There is something uncanny in the fact that Poe's first important contribution to criticism was written and published by a twenty-two year old man, a military veteran who had already washed out of one center of higher learning and was even then courting a fresh wave of academic and military disappointment. After serving for two years in the U.S. Army, Poe resigned from his position as a noncommissioned officer to enroll in West Point Academy in 1830, though, as it would turn out, his eyes for a military career had been bigger than his stomach; in less than a year, Poe launched a campaign of insubordination that eventually saw him court marshaled and expelled. In the midst of this misadventure in soldiery, Poe wrote the epistolary essay (datelined "West Point, 1831") that would become the preface to *Poems by Edgar A. Poe, Second Edition* (1831).

"Letter to Mr. —" offers a kind of literary-critical sonogram, a prefiguration of the themes and fixations Poe would flesh out over the next two decades. Stylistically, the essay runs the gamut of rhetorical tricks, moods, and postures that would eventually distinguish Poe's critical voice: urbane persiflage, unimpeachable tastefulness, corrosive disgust, naked hypocrisy, and the profound-sounding vagueness of quasi-occult insight. It is also possible to trace the inchoate outlines of Poe's later aesthetic theory. In the "Letter," Poe first decries British literature's despotic hold on America's taste (and

market); he first sneers at the absurd idea of a long poem; he first guarantees qualified judgment's superiority to popular opinion; he first insists that truth should be sought in surfaces, not in depths; he even offers half-formed versions of what would become his critical signatures: the *autonomy* of poetry, and the primacy of *effect*. In sum, the preface is a surprisingly comprehensive entree into the public sphere – particularly the subspheres of critical judgment and self-promotion – that would thenceforth serve as his critical stomping ground.

But the essay is most notable for its fast-and-loose approach to polemics. As a many-limbed, schoolyard-rules pummeling of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the “Letter” is a minor masterpiece of juvenilia. While the epistolary essay’s titular addressee has never been positively identified, Poe *did* dedicate the edition of *Poems* it prefaced to his fellow cadets at West Point. In this light, it makes good sense to read the preface as a conspiratorial missive from a rebellious collegian to his peers. The piece is as serious as it is silly, as feral as it is conspiratorial. In roughly equal measure, “Letter to Mr. —” investigates the nature of critical authority and judgment, and lashes out at the Lake poets (and, with especial ferocity, Wordsworth). Poe proves remarkably game in the little acts of sophomoric literary vandalism that seem somehow bracing, even brave. The essay frames its critique of the Lake Poets in the pragmatic-sophistic terms of literary nationalism Poe would slip into and out of like a pair of toy handcuffs over the course of his career: “You are aware of the great barrier in the path of an American writer. He is read, if at all, in preference to the combined and established wit of the world. I say established; for it is with literature as with law or empire – an established name is an

estate in tenure, or a throne in possession.”¹⁰⁵ Positioning himself a particularly savvy specimen of the Aspiring American Author type, Poe acknowledges his quest for recognition and profit artificially constrained by a transatlantic literary market rigged in favor of the European establishment.

Against the backdrop of this moral tableau, Poe launches his madcap assault on “the most singular heresy in [poetry’s] modern history – the heresy of what is called very foolishly, the Lake School” (CT, 6). Wordsworth catches the brunt of the broadside for what Poe sees as his intellectualized abstraction, jargon-laced obscurity, and versified sermonizing – the enduring cardinal sins in Poe’s poetic economy. But again, Poe’s values are clumsily cloaked in the rhetoric of quasi-deductive reasoning and appeals to authority, as in his effort to show up Wordsworth’s presumed belief that instruction, not pleasure, is a poem’s proper end:

Aristotle, with singular assurance, has declared poetry the most philosophical of all writing – but it required a Wordsworth to pronounce it the most metaphysical. He seems to think that the end of poetry is, or should be, instruction – yet it is a truism that the end of our existence is happiness; if so, the end of every separate part of our existence – every thing connected with our existence should still be happiness. Therefore the end of instruction should be happiness; and happiness is another name for pleasure; – therefore the end of instruction should be pleasure: yet we see the above mentioned opinion implies precisely the reverse. (CT, 6-7).¹⁰⁶

The letter’s opening paragraphs lays bare two “vulgar error[s]” infecting the prevailing view of criticism: first, the belief “that a good critique on a poem may be written by one

¹⁰⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, *Critical Theory: The Major Documents* ed. Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine (Urbana: Illinois UP, 2009), 5. Further citations from this volume will be given parenthetically in the text as CT.

¹⁰⁶ Actually, Aristotle declares poetry “more philosophical and more serious than history; for it speaks more of what is universal, whereas history speaks of what is particular.” The “universal,” for Aristotle, betokens some hypothetical, non-impossible in the future; the particular is rather what has already happened. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Selections*, trans. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 9.1451b7-10.

who is no poet himself”; second, “the notion that no poet can form a correct estimate of his own writings” (CT, 6, 7). Poe rather posits a strict correspondence between the concepts of “poetical talent” and critical judiciousness: “in proportion of the poetical talent, would be the justice of a critique upon poetry. Therefore, a bad poet would, I grant, make a false critique, and his self-love would infallibly bias his little judgment in his favor; but a poet, who is indeed a poet, could not, I think, fail of making a just critique” (CT, 5, 6).

Though it is not explicitly marked, Poe’s poet-critic equation repurposes one of Coleridge’s famous claims: “No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher.”¹⁰⁷ But Poe’s more explicit target is Wordsworth’s insistence that, in order to judge with “absolute value,” a critic must have “a mind at once poetical and philosophical,” and must cultivate that mind by making “poetry a study.”¹⁰⁸ Beyond didacticism and obtuseness, then, the British poets’ “heresy,” is a willing, even eager, subordination of poetry to knowledge. Poe will have none of this. His poet is emphatically *not* a philosopher; indeed, poetry is inimical to philosophy, just as philosophy is incompatible with criticism: “Against the subtleties which would make poetry a study – not a passion – it becomes the metaphysician to reason – but the poet to protest” (CT, 7). Poe’s invocation of the fidelity between poetry and protest might account, to some extent, for the seeming absence of either justice or critique in the essay. If the “Letter” *is* critically just, it is so precisely to the extent that it expresses the full

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1884), 381.

¹⁰⁸ William Wordsworth, “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” in *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 10, *Prefatory Essays and Notes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), 75.

weight of poetic protest, which Poe further figures as a battle *between* authorities, for the *prize* of authority: “The diffidence... with which I venture to dispute their authority, would be overwhelming, did I not feel, from the bottom of my heart, that learning has little to do with the imagination – intellect with the passions – or age with poetry” (CT, 7).

The most remarkable moment in the “Letter” is, strangely, an act of *retribution* against Wordsworth’s bad taste, his injudicious judgment of James Macpherson’s Ossian poems: “that he may bear down every argument in favor of these poems, he triumphantly drags forward a passage, in his abomination of which he expects the reader to sympathize.” That he seems particularly fond of the Ossian passage in question only heightens his contempt for Wordsworth’s contempt. Poe does not sympathize. Instead, as if to ask Wordsworth how *he* likes it, Poe “triumphantly drags forth” a pair of passages from Wordsworth’s pastorals (though not before treating them to a generous dose of editorial tweaking):

Imprimis:

“And now she’s at the pony’s head,
And now she’s at the pony’s tail,
On that side now, and now on this,
And almost stifled her with bliss –
A few sad tears does Betty shed,
She pats the pony where or when
She knows not: happy Betty Foy!
O Johnny! never mind the Doctor!”

Secondly:

“The dew was falling fast, the–stars began to blink,
I heard a voice, it said–drink, pretty creature, drink,
And looking o’er the hedge, be–fore me I espied
A snow-white mountain lamb with a – maiden at its side,
No other sheep were near, the lamb was all alone,
And by a slender cord was – tether’d to a stone.”

Now we have no doubt this is all true; we *will* believe it,
indeed we will, Mr. W. Is it sympathy for the sheep you wish to excite?
I love a sheep from the bottom of my heart (CT, 9)

Poe's misquotations transform Wordsworth's bucolic portraits of ecstatic communion with nature, which *happen to involve* livestock, into travesties of themselves – viz., bucolic portraits of ecstatic communion with livestock, which *happen to take place in* nature.¹⁰⁹ If this performance – a kind of ventriloquist act whose dummies are the exquisite corpses of Wordsworth's verse – can't quite be described as a just critique in the conventional sense, perhaps this mode of grotesque burlesque is what Poe had in mind when claimed that “protest” “becomes” the poet-critic. If this is so, the poet's license of protest turns out to legitimize virtually every gesture of opposition: intentional misreading, caustic sarcasm, naked expressions of contempt. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that this hair-splitting rationalization misses the point, or invents a point where none exists. If Poe engages in precious little of the “judicious criticism” he seems to have promised, it may be because he was lying, or didn't want to, or didn't care one way or the other. Perhaps he forgot. The absence might mean precisely nothing, irrespective of our incomprehension of the idea that anything in Poe – even an absence – means nothing. But if we take seriously the proposition that a judicious critic is necessarily a good poet, the “Letter” suggests that Poe is not a very good poet.

Above all else, “Letter to Mr. —” inaugurates a problem that would occupy Poe for the length of his career: how to make the roles of “poet” and “critic” two sides of the same coin, without the whole coin being swallowed by philosophy, or science, or some

¹⁰⁹ As Stuart and Susan Levine observe in their introduction to the essay, “Misquoting Wordsworth is unforgivably unfair, but it is funny, and it sets up one of the best belly laughs in Poe, his laconic line about the love of sheep” (CT, 2). Jonathan H. Hartmann provides a useful account of Poe's distortions of Wordsworth's language. In its original form, Hartmann notes, “The Idiot Boy” is “an extended rural melodrama focusing... on the frightened parent of a mentally retarded youth. By contrast, Poe's manipulation of the text produces a mother who appears to be thoroughly consumed by her passionate sharing of loving embraces with the family horse.” Hartmann, *The Marketing of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Routledge 2008), 50.

other way of knowing truth rather than feeling beauty. Richard Jacobs sees the “Letter” as Poe’s “indirect attempt to qualify himself as an expert in judging poetry,” and this is surely fair, with two caveats.¹¹⁰ First, the attempt is indirect precisely because the essay treats expert judgment only as a generic abstraction: Poe does not claim to be a good critic; he rather explains what a good critic can do (write good poetry, and judge poetry well). Second, if we accept the idea that Poe is speaking of himself as a brilliant judge of poetry through the gauze of rhetorical deflection (and of course he is), the expertise he displays is essentially gustatory – he is attempting to qualify himself as an expert, but only in the sense that he has very good taste, indeed. And, since the only condition of “judicious criticism” the “Letter” offers is discrimination, the only condition for compositional competency as a poet is the *post hoc* ability to render a “correct estimate” of what has already been made. Poe distributes literary power evenly between authors and critics by revealing, in an *Oliver Twist*-like reversal, that poets have been critics (and critics poets) all along. But while the bravura equation (P=C) is pyrotechnic, it is only slightly more persuasive than the analogous claim that every person with a sophisticated palate is, necessarily, a gourmet chef.

Poe’s poet-critic comports himself as an amateur (his theatrical abhorrence of philosophy is a reaction against its encroachment onto poetry’s sacred ground, but it is also a measure of Poe’s resistance to specialization) and as a connoisseur.¹¹¹ For

¹¹⁰ Robert D. Jacobs, *Poe: Journalist & Critic* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1969), 51.

¹¹¹ In fact, virtually the only passage deleted from the essay’s 1836 reprint, in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, qualifies the effective critic precisely as a connoisseur: “Poetry, above all things, is a beautiful painting whose tints, to minute inspection, are confusion worse confounded, but start boldly out to the cursory glance of the connoisseur” (CT, 12). You can see why Poe decided to get rid of it.

eighteenth-century Anglo-aesthetes like Shaftesbury and John Richardson, connoisseurship meant evaluating art on rational, but eminently non-specialized, grounds.¹¹² Poe was, in 1831, still several years away from taking up his career as a “Magazinish,” beginning with his tumultuous editorship of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and his letters of the period reveal him as a passionate, eminently amateur aspirant after the laurels of poetic immortality.

But connoisseurship also has, in Michael Polanyi’s luminous critique of positivism, *Personal Knowledge*, a supplemental relationship with scientific objectivity: since “[t]he avowed purpose of the exact sciences is to establish complete intellectual control over the experience in terms of precise rules which can be formally set out and empirically tested,” Polanyi writes, investigators are left in the lurch of personal judgment whenever precise rules and perfect calibrations are lacking.¹¹³ An exercise of personal judgment is not, however, an opportunity for the id to explode into some purely private caprice; it rather depends on inherited and cultivated forms of what Polanyi famously calls “tacit knowledge.” Between perfect objectivism and total subjectivism lies connoisseurship, which, “like skill, can be communicated only by example, not by precept. To become an expert wine-taster... you must go through a long course of

¹¹² For the remaking of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English “men of taste” on the model of Continental connoisseurs and virtuosi, see Brian Cowan, “An Open Elite: The Peculiarities of Connoisseurship in Early Modern England,” *Modern Intellectual History* 1.2 (2004): 151-83; for Jonathan Richardson’s elevation of connoisseurship to the level of art and philosophy, and his attempt to fortify its reputation as a “science,” see Carol Gibson-Wood, “Jonathan Richardson and the Rationalization of Connoisseurship,” *Art History* 7.1 (1984): 38-56.

¹¹³ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2005 [1958]), 18.

experience under the guidance of a master.”¹¹⁴ In the world of technical rationality, though, such guild-like, mysterious forms of mastery are mere orthopedics, placeholders for new rules and new methods that make the implied principles explicit and formal:

Wherever connoisseurship is found operating within science or technology we may assume that it persists only because it has not been possible to replace it by a measurable grading. For a measurement has the advantage of greater objectivity, as shown by the fact that measurements give consistent results in the hands of different observers all over the world, while such objectivity is rarely achieved in the case of physiognomic appreciations.¹¹⁵

Whether Poe brought literary criticism any closer to the fantasy of transparent “objectivity,” and whether it would be good if he had, are questions above my pay grade; but it does seem clear that many of Poe’s contributions to aesthetics and poetic theory consisted in formalizing “precise rules” for the practices of poetry and criticism.

The rules of art Poe developed over the course of the 1830s are perhaps all too familiar to Americanists: poetry is a vessel for beauty, not truth (the heresy of the didactic; the autonomy of art); the reader experiences beauty as a kind of pleasure that is not antithetical to exquisite agony (the poetic principle; supernal ideality); this experience is an undifferentiated impression (the unity or totality of effect); to achieve this singular purpose, the art object must be governed at all times by an overarching authorial design (methodical composition); because this experience is a kind of intense emotional event, its expression must be compressed (a long poem is impossible). Taken together, this bundle of rules constitutes Poe’s poetic “theory,” but it also constitutes his *practice*.

¹¹⁴ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 56.

¹¹⁵ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 57.

In his puzzled study of Poe's influence on the French symbolists, T.S. Eliot lays out his own belief that "the poet's theories should arise out of his practice rather than his practice out of his theories."¹¹⁶ (342). Poe did not recognize the theory/practice distinction, as evinced already in his 1836 review of Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*: "theory and practice are in so much *one*, that the former implies or includes the latter. A theory is only good as such, in proportion to its reducibility to practice. If the practice fail, it is because the theory is imperfect" (ER, 225). Though he has fiction in mind, this passage reads like "The Philosophy of Composition" compressed into a kōan: if an author only understands the principles of composition, all fickle choice, random chance, and inspiration from who knows where is struck from the equation; all that's left is inevitable necessity. Poe's theory of creativity is "inventorial or recombinative," as Robert Macfarlane describes the classical photonegative of Romanticism's notion of radical origination; for Poe, as for the classicists who preceded and the formalists who followed him, "the writer is merely a rearranger of bits and pieces: an administrator rather than a producer."¹¹⁷ Inspired romantics, daemon-driven transcendentalists, have no need of principle or theory; they write down whatever God says. The success of Poe's self-administrating writer boils down to crafty skill, high standards, and informed judgment – but above all, to his fluent knowledge of the rules.

¹¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, "From Poe to Valéry," *The Hudson Review* 2.3 (1949): 327-42, 342.

¹¹⁷ Robert Macfarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3-4.

Modular Literature: Poe's Fundamental Theorem

If composition and criticism are the same skill in reverse, Poe needs a way to describe that reversibility. The centerpiece of Poe's aesthetic theory – the logical schema of “analysis” and “composition” – reimagines cognition as unified-but-reversible process: the composer composes his composition by combining monadic fragments of language into amalgams that, in their mottled complexity, give off the impression of genuine originality; the critic analyzes such compositions by breaking them back down into their component parts, and thereby demystifies the artificial aura of originality. In this way, Poe makes poetic ability strictly proportional to critical acumen.

Poe treated analysis as a crucial discovery of the emergent science of phrenology – and, indeed, phrenologists were enchanted by the idea of a faculty dedicated to unraveling the world's endless chains of causality. But, as Paul Hurh has recently shown, Poe's two-party system was “inherited from debates over science in Renaissance history,” particularly the seventeenth-century *Port-Royal Logic*, wherein “analysis” is “comprised of two significant processes – the process of resolution and the process of composition” (Hurh, 469). Resolution or analysis (which Poe uses interchangeably) involves breaking a corporate whole into its component parts; composition is the creative faculty of combining parts into new conglomerates. This reversible process, Hurh writes, allows for “a conceptualization of scientific discourse and poetic imagination as two expressions of a single method” (Hurh, 471). Where critical work is analytic, creative

work is synthetic, for which Poe uses the Coleridgean term “imagination,” the phrenological term “combination,” and the logical term “composition” synonymously.¹¹⁸

Because genuine analysis is not a subjective process, any genuine analyst’s beliefs, opinions, and presuppositions are elided from the process: “the interest of an analysis, or reconstruction... is quite independent of any real or fancied interest in the thing analyzed” (ER, 14). Though analysis is, in a sense, a personal capacity – only accessible to a few – its enactment bypasses the parts of the personality that count as personal. By 1842, with his creation of a principled criticism, Poe had also self-consciously formulated a concept of “literary” writing. He called one writer’s farcical novels “practical-joke publications” and “not ‘literature’... Being in no respect works of art, they neither deserve, nor are amenable to criticism” (ER, 179). Yet, though he provides us with a qualitative distinction between “literature” and tripe, Poe provides no criteria for adjudicating the difference between the two categories other than taste and the critic’s own good word. Poe echoes the claim of unified theory-practice in his “Marginal

¹¹⁸ Poe’s use of analysis and composition is structurally quite similar to the fundamental theorem of calculus which holds that differentiation and integration are inverse processes. I won’t pretend to be fluent in the formal proofs and technical details; at its most abstract, though, the intuitive appeal is enormous and apparent: everything that can be broken down can be built back up, and anything that can be put together can be taken apart. See David M. Bressoud, “Historical Reflections on Teaching the Fundamental Theorem of Integral Calculus,” *The American Mathematical Monthly*, Vol. 118, No. 2 (February 2011), pp. 99-115. It is also worth comparing to Victor Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization, the literary device of making a stone stoney: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*” Comparatively easy to forget is the fact that Shklovsky presents *ostranenie* in the context of a theoretical inversion of ordinary prose speech and poetic speech. Ordinary speech involves habituation, the “process, ideally realized in algebra,” through which “things are replaced with symbols... By this ‘algebraic’ method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics.” Algebraic reduction, “the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort” (11). The “artistic trademark,” on the other hand, is employed by the conscious, deliberate artist in order to maximize the observer’s “length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (19, 16). Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1965).

Notes” of 1845: “In all cases, if the practice fail, it is because the theory is imperfect.”

Here, he concisely lays out his belief that artistic ability and critical perspicacity are strictly proportional:

One who has some artistical ability may know how to do a thing, and even show how to do it, and yet fail in doing it after all; but the artist and the man of some artistical ability must not be confounded. He only is the former who can carry the most shadowy precepts into successful application. To say that a critic could not have written the work which he criticizes, is to put forth a contradiction in terms. (ER, 1365).

Critical and artistic ability seem less like two well-balanced quantities than one capacity named twice. In such declarations of method, Poe tries to imagine a mode of aesthetic judgments whose conclusions seem as certain and inevitable as Euclidian deductions.

“Originality” is a central tenet of Poe’s aesthetic axiology. Yet originality is never absolute, and its recipe can always be reverse-engineered by the skilled analyst: “All novel conceptions are merely unusual combinations... [A]ll which seems to be *new*—which appears to be a *creation* of intellect... is resolvable into the old. The wildest and most vigorous effort of mind cannot stand the test of this analysis” (ER, 334). The more valuable originality becomes in determining literary value, the more powerful “analysis” — with its built-in ability to undermine any representation of novelty by dissolving it into the merely conventional — becomes as a tool to vindicate or eviscerate works and their authors. The critic’s “*legitimate* task is,” Poe wrote, consists “in pointing out and analyzing defects and showing how the work might have been improved, to aid the general cause of Letters, without undue heed of the individual literary man” (ER, 1040).

Analysis, in the form Poe imagined it, never requires a hypothesis because it is not open to doubt; nor is a form of “interpretation,” because it does not generate any new meaning of its own. The critic simply moves from the given whole to finer subsets of parts, unpacking each part into smaller segments. So, Poe cultivates in his criticism a

sense of principled certainty, a sense that his judgments and prescriptions are justified on the grounds of some internally coherent philosophical system, even as the contents of that system continuously shift, substitute, and redefine one another. Poe's critic, then, can engage in captious faultfinding while claiming to subordinate his will and wishes to the higher entity of literature. If the crucial effect of poetry, for Poe, is the reader's experience of beauty, the crucial effect of criticism is the reader's experience of the critic's right judgment – his impeccable ability to discriminate. Poe paints this as an ethical imperative, and a matter of forthrightness: "It is... the duty of all whom circumstances have led into criticism... to uphold the true dignity of genius, to combat its degradation, to plead for the exercise of its powers" (ER, 314).

In an 1842 review, Poe approvingly quotes a lengthy passage from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's essay "Upon the Spirit of True Criticism," in which Bulwer writes, "There is no criticism in this country [England]—considering that word as the name of a science... In fact no science requires such elaborate study as criticism. It is the most analytical of our mental operations." Yet he invokes the name of science for a number of dubious ends; the critic uses his science "to say *why* that passage is a sin against nature, or that plot a violation of art – to bring deep knowledge of life in all its guises" (ER, 162). Bulwer's conception of "science" allows him to make aesthetic judgments on ethical grounds.¹¹⁹ In the "Exordium to Critical Notices" (1842), Poe frames his pretensions to science more tentatively, but claims to be gaining ground in the war on bad taste: "That

¹¹⁹ Thomas Babington Macaulay was operating in a similarly triumphalist register in his 1852 "On the Royal Society of Literature": "the principles of literary criticism, though equally fixed with those on which the chemist and the surgeon proceed, are by no means equally recognised... It is more difficult to ascertain and establish the merits of a poem than the powers of a machine or the benefits of a new remedy. Hence it is literature, that quackery is most easily puffed, and excellence most easily decried" (Macaulay, *On the Royal Society of Literature*). *The Works of Lord Macaulay*, vol. 7 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871) 575.

the public attention, in America, has, of late days, been more than usually directed to the matter of literary criticism, is plainly apparent. Our periodicals are beginning to acknowledge the importance of the science (shall we so term it?) and to disdain the flippant *opinion* which so long has been made its substitute” (ER, 1027). The appeal to science is an appeal to the critic’s specialization; not merely one voice in the throng, he is a student of the deeper truths manifest in the object of study – in this case, poetry. Criticism is a study of natural laws, and therefore, in principle, transhistorical: “That a criticism ‘*now*’ should be different in spirit... from a criticism at any previous period, is to insinuate a charge of variability in laws that cannot vary—the laws of man’s heart and intellect—for these are the sole basis upon which the true critical art is established” (ER, 1031). “Following the highest authority, we would wish... to limit literary criticism to criticism upon *Art*.” Criticism is “the test or analysis of *Art*, (*not* of opinion)” and, consequently, the critical test is “only properly employed upon productions which have their basis in art itself” (ER, 1032).

As a blueprint for good writing, Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” offers aspiring poets about what Japanese-language VCR manuals gave middlebrow American comedians in the 1980s: plenty of fodder for abstract reflection, but little in the way of practical instruction. Poe offers a reconstruction of the writing process of “The Raven,” in which the composition – as the opposite trajectory of analysis – is strictly based on principle. Composition, in fact, precedes writing – it is an act of mental conception. Poe claims that “every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *denouement* before any thing be attempted with the pen” (ER, 13). Only with the preconceived end “constantly in view” can the writer “give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by

making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention” (ER, 13). So the paper’s “design,” he writes, is “to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (ER, 14-15).

The essay’s intended effect is the impression of Poe’s total and rigorous mastery over the writing process, which he juxtaposes with the broad majority of scribblers: “Most writers – poets in especial – prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition – and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the curtain.” Revealing the process of composition means displaying “the painful erasures and interpolations – in a word, the wheels and pinions – the tackle for scene-shifting – the step-ladders and demon-traps... which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the literary *histrion*.” Indeed, most authors are in no “condition to retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained. In general, suggestions, having arisen pell-mell, are pursued and forgotten in a similar manner.” If this makes composition seem haphazard and unscientific, it is only due to a deficiency in the reasoning powers or memories of other poets; as against the rabble, Poe has not “the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions” (ER, 14). His total recall is not here limited to certain texts – he remembers the “progressive steps” of “any,” which is to say, all of his “compositions” – the rigorous, principled movements from a chaotic field of elements to a plot-ruled, intentionally designed art object.

Of course, since “Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem,” the poem is designed with the end of beauty constantly in the poet’s view. Poe claims that the breed of “pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful. When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect – they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of the *soul* – *not* of intellect, or of heart.” This pleasurable elevation “is experienced in consequence of contemplating ‘the beautiful’” (ER, 16). Poe’s definition of beauty as the experience of the beautiful is curiously circular – beauty is the effect of contemplating the beautiful – but the emphasis on effect rather than essence enables Poe to conceive of the poem in the quasi-scientific context of cause and effect – a problematic that Thomas Haskell identifies squarely with professionalism: “Esoteric questions of causal attribution had always been the *métier* of the professional,” whose role was and is “to provide answers to esoteric questions that defied common sense and custom.”¹²⁰ The question of how to make good art certain defies common sense and custom, but rather than appealing the “fine frenzy” pretended to by other poets, Poe appeals to principle, even as he gives a suppositious catalogue of his process of crafting “The Raven.”

Mid-career Poe’s overwhelming focus on effect – both in his aesthetic theory and, if we can trust his aesthetic theory, his imaginative writing – comes with risks. First, there is no way for Poe to guarantee that the author’s desired effect will be successfully manufactured in the reader; all Poe can do is legislate over the potentially limitless array

¹²⁰ Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000 [1977]), 81, 101.

of causes that, with luck, harmonize or transmogrify into the effect. The effect only comes it to being, it only *happens*, when the finished composition is consumed by some individual, some audience of one.¹²¹ By privileging “effect” – something that necessarily post-dates the process of composition – Poe built his “Philosophy of Composition” on a kind of rhetorical quicksand. For the artist at work, that is, “effect” can only be a normative ideal – a goal or a target – never a procedure. Second, the elevation of unified effect is something of a pyrrhic victory, insofar as the locus of this “effect” is, by necessity, the subjective experience of the reader; relocating literary value to the site of affective transfer between work and audience all but relinquishes whatever authority the author might have or want. The effect, that is, happens in or to or on the reader; there can be no unity if the reader does not experience the effect of unity. So long as the poem is a good poem, and its reader a good reader, there would seem to be no short-circuiting the system of literary value. This would seem to shift the balance of power entirely from the creator, and even the critic, to the private consumer. Insofar as the “beautiful” is only given its existence by the experience of beauty, it opens the door for an aesthetic relativism in which a doggerel limerick would have to be accepted as genuine if it elevates the soul of the reader by giving an experience of beauty. (I confess to being one such reader.) Since “originality” and “beauty” are both effects rather than ontological states of affairs, they become merely heuristic indicators. That is, a poem is “original” or “beautiful” if its audience feels those effects. Only the status of “critic,” as opposed to

¹²¹ Perhaps the best illustration of the limitations of Poe’s emphasis on effect comes from another card-carrying aesthete, Vladimir Nabokov, whose echo of Poe is surely no accident: “the study of the sociological or political impact of literature has to be devised mainly for those who are by temperament or education immune to the aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature, for those who do not experience the telltale tingle between the shoulder blades.” Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 64. This again obscures more about the process of literary production than it enlightens.

“general reader,” provides cover for the legitimating ability to use these heuristics authoritatively.

In a pair of 1844 letters to James Lowell, Poe ceded ground on his demands for personal autonomy and proposed a kind of clerisy, a proto-profession, of competent critics: “Suppose... that the élite of our men of letters should combine secretly” into a “coalition,” producing a magazine with “articles to be supplied by the members solely, upon a concerted plan of action. A nominal editor to be elected from among the number. How could such a journal fail?”¹²² coalition – a kind of joint-stock company owned and operated by the contributors – and its magazine, was to offer “a scheme for protecting ourselves from the imposition of publishers.” Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, such a project would “afford (in the circulation & profit of the journal) a remuneration to ourselves for whatever we should write” (Letters, 1:265). Poe’s mutual aid society blends elements of a Junto-like elitist sect with the collective bargaining and protective aspects of a trade union. It also offers exclusivity, both to its producers and its consumers: the magazine would “address the aristocracy of talent” rather than the common reader (Letters, 1:266). Yet Poe’s attempt to create an intellectual aristocracy is precisely his attempt to create a profession of literature. An aristocracy of taste or talent – a “natural aristocracy” – is (rhetorically, if not actually) a meritocracy, not a heritable nobility. Tellingly, Poe has little to say about the scientific or analytical credentials of the “élite” he has in mind.

¹²² Edgar Allan Poe, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2 volumes, ed. John Ward Ostrom (New York: Gordian, 1966), 1:247. Further citations from these volumes will be given parenthetically in the text as Letters.

Detection and Perversion: Tales Against Analysis

Poe's fiction, far more than his nonfiction, explores the depths and reveals the limits of the essentially impractical practice of analysis. His tales of criminal detection take this fantasy of aesthetic infallibility to the superheroic extreme of perceptual infallibility *tout court*. The visionary-analytical detective, C. Auguste Dupin, seems able to draw from some primordial pool of truth, to describe the world's messiest problems with the precision of formal logic. In his tales of criminal *confession*, on the other hand, Poe develops the countervailing concept of perverseness – an illustration, if only by indirection, of those depths of mind impregnable to analysis. Poe's detective fiction offers what can profitably be seen as ironic commentary on his depiction of the role of the critic. Perhaps Poe's most famous treatment of analysis comes in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the tale of ratiocination that introduced readers to the remarkable investigative capacities of Dupin, a gadfly, flaneur, and amateur investigator. The plot turns on an unusual event: an escaped orangutan attempts to mimic the practice of straight-razor shaving on the pattern it has observed in its human warden. Needless to say, the ape's unorthodox technique culminates in an effect not typical of shaving, viz., the decapitation of an old woman. We might hazard to draw a kind of moral from this catastrophic failure of intent and technique: design has no necessary, determinant influence on the experience of a unified effect. However acute in conception or carefully planned, a shave can become a beheading.

The city's policemen, forensic investigators, and journalists alike are baffled by the murder – "if indeed a murder has been committed at all," as one newspaper report

helplessly notes – which seems to have been committed in a securely locked room.¹²³

Contemptuous of the police's "shell of an investigation," Dupin enlists a nameless sidekick (who also serves, *avant* John Watson, as the story's narrator) for an unofficial inquiry of their own (T, 544-45). With evidence pieced together from a thorough examination of the crime scene, Dupin uses his remarkable powers of observation and analysis to surmise not only the true identity of the killer, but also to infer the existence of the hapless sailor who let the ape escape.

The first thing to note about the Dupin stories is that their subject of interest – Dupin himself – is walled off from the reader, who can only access the detective through the narrator's mediation.¹²⁴ He is, in a sense, the general reader to Dupin's analytical critic. The opening pages of "Rue Morgue" consist of the narrator's essayistic exploration of what he calls "[t]he mental features discoursed of as the analytical." These "features," though, cannot be explained simply or directly, since the cognitive capacities that together make up the analytical "faculty of re-solution" are, "in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects" (T, 527-28). The observer is forced to approach the abstract concept of "analysis" indirectly, observing its effects without understanding its essence. The first such effect enumerated by the narrator is the pleasure analytical exercise offers to individuals whose faculties are highly developed: "We know," he writes, "that they are always to their possessor, when inordinately possessed, a source of the liveliest enjoyment." It seems, in other words, that

¹²³ Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales & Sketches* volume 2, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Urbana: Illinois UP), 544. Further citations from this volume will be given parenthetically in the text as T.

¹²⁴ As Charles Rzepka notes, the narrator of Poe's detective stories serves the dual functions of keeping readers "at a distance from the immediate observations and conclusions of his detective hero and unobtrusively controlling, through delay and proper sequencing, access to information crucial to solving the crime" (Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 77).

average people, those endowed only with average analytical talents, cannot *experience* this profound delight for themselves; they can, however, *see* for themselves that more highly developed individuals draw “the liveliest enjoyment” from exercising their “talent” for analysis. As an “analyst,” Dupin “glories... in that moral activity which *disentangles*. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play. He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions to each a degree of *acumen* which appears to the ordinary apprehension praeternatural. His results, brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition” (T, 528). That the “air” is only an “air” is evidenced, for instance, by the narrator’s insistence that “There was not a particle of *charlatanerie* about Dupin” (T, 535). Dupin does not merely, or even partially, put on a show; he is all substance, or the pure confluence of substance and style.

The narrator of “The Murders of Rue Morgue” is initially enchanted by “the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of [Dupin’s] imagination” (T, 532). Indeed, it is because of Dupin’s imagination – his “rich ideality” – that the narrator is “prepared to expect” his “peculiar analytical ability” (T, 533). Again, analysis and imagination are convertible terms, two trajectories of the same phenomenon: “the ingenious are always fanciful, and the *truly* imaginative never otherwise than analytic” (T, 531). So analysis seems to be a formal, rigorously logical process: confronted with some riddle or rebus, the analyst endeavors to unravel the aura of mystery, to decipher the solution to the problem. From this angle, analysis resembles cryptography, the two-way process of, first, disguising intelligible information by converting it into unintelligible gibberish and, second, breaking this code back down by applying a secret key – some set of symbols or equation

that enables the reader to translate encrypted information and plain meaning back and forth, into and out of one another. The narrator observes, with no little equivocation, “The faculty of re-resolution is possibly much invigorated by mathematical study.” But even the “highest branch” of math has “unjustly, and merely on account of its retrograde operations... been called, as if *par excellence*, analysis. Yet to calculate is not in itself to analyze. A chess-player, for example, does the one without effort at the other” (T, 528).

The narrator illustrates this idea by outlining a rough hierarchy of leisure games, ranked by the analytical rigor required to master them. The more complex game of chess is trumped, counterintuitively, by checkers, because “the higher powers of the reflective intellect are more decidedly and more usefully tasked by the unostentatious game of draughts [checkers] than by all the elaborate frivolity of chess.” Complexity introduces randomness, and randomness. Admirers of chess are overawed by the variety and irregularity of the game’s menagerie of pieces, each characterized “different and *bizarre* motions... The possible moves being not only manifold but involute, the chances of... oversights are multiplied; and in nine cases out of ten, it is the more concentrative rather than the more acute player who conquers.” In checkers, on the other hand, “the probabilities of inadvertence are diminished,” so any “advantages” gained by a player must be referable to that player’s “superior *acumen*” (T, 528). The narrator invokes a hypothetical game of checkers,

where the pieces are reduced to four kings, and where, of course, no oversight is to be expected. It is obvious that here the victory can be decided (the players being at all equal) only by some *recherché* movement, the result of some strong exertion of the intellect. Deprived of ordinary resources, the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not unfrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation. (T, 529)

The skill of the analyst has nothing to do, here, with finding the truth, or getting to the bottom of some complex system of elements and contingencies; it is, instead, a matter of diagnosing weakness in an opponent. Complex problems can be solved by calculation; profundity, on the contrary, is the sole province of analysis.

The narrator illustrates his meaning by drawing an analogical equivalence between “the skill of the analyst” and the skills characteristic of a successful player of whist – or, in modern terms, a card shark. In chess, says the narrator, “what is only complex is mistaken (a not unusual error) for what is profound.” Poker requires the “higher powers of the reflective intellect” that can find no purchase in the chaotic ditherings of a chess board: “Beyond doubt there is nothing of a similar nature so greatly tasking the faculty of analysis... proficiency in whist implies capacity for success in all those more important undertakings where mind struggles with mind.” Here, the narrator offers a surprising definition: “When I say proficiency, I mean that perfection in the game which includes a comprehension of *all* the sources whence legitimate advantage may be derived. These are not only manifold but multiform, and lie frequently among recesses of thought altogether inaccessible to the ordinary understanding” (T, 529).

So, from the hermeneutic perspective of Poe’s essays, analysis is a powerful way to get at the truth; but from the rhetorical perspective of “Rue Morgue,” it implies a facility with manipulation. But again, the narrator reaffirms the capacity of analysis to get to the truth, but this time on the grounds of evading or outmaneuvering mere calculation. The skilled card player “notes every variation of face as the play progresses, gathering a fund of thought from the differences in the expression of certainty, of surprise, of triumph, or of chagrin... embarrassment, hesitation, eagerness, or trepidation – all afford,

to his apparently intuitive perception, indications of the true state of affairs” (T, 529). The similarity between analysis and poker is, then, not merely metaphorical; indeed, the narrator’s treatment of poker starts to get terminologically slippery:

But it is in matters beyond the limits of mere rule that the skill of the analyst is evinced. He makes, in silence, a host of observations and inferences. So, perhaps, do his companions; and the difference in the extent of the information obtained, lies not so much in the validity of the inference as in the quality of the observation. The necessary knowledge is of *what* to observe. Our player confines himself not at all; nor, because the game is the object, does he reject deductions from things external to the game. (T, 529-30)

Thanks in part to the unacknowledged substitution of “the analyst” and “[o]ur player,” it is not altogether clear whether we are talking literally about gambling, or using gambling as a metaphor for analysis in general.

Because the critic’s job is to analyze, he is impotent in the face of that which cannot be analyzed – and this is the reason Poe places his critique of phrenology on the grounds of the perverse in his fiction rather than in his criticism. So, another of Poe’s strategies for cultivating expertise is more problematic: in his tales of the perverse employ the terms of (pseudo)scientific discourse even as they burlesque the conventions and critique the credibility of that discourse. These tales narrate the limits of knowledge, and so hold forth a kind of negative knowing – they delineate an empty place, something outside of the known (perhaps even the knowable). Poe was fond of the concept of and term “perverse,” and both have become common tools in the criticism of his literary productions. Perversion in the sense Poe would have understood it had little to do with contemporary notions of sexual deviation from procreative sexuality. It is not a question, here, of misplaced desire, impotence, frustration, or sexual confusion; it is a question, rather, of *whose testimony is trustworthy* (less missionary position, more position of the missionary). Perverseness is, in Pauline terms, a post-lapsarian condition against which

only true faith can act as an orthopedic, recovering the supplicant's position on the true path. Salvation is contingent on a proper posture of supplication on the part of the sinner. Therefore, of course, it's not so straightforward as having faith — one must have faith in the correct thing, and have the proper information or doctrine to have faith *about*, in order not to worship false idols.

In an 1836 review of a popular handbook, Mrs. L. Miles's *Phrenology and the Moral Influence of Phrenology*, Poe celebrates phrenology's graduation in public standing from cultish humbug to genuine disciplinary practice. Phrenology is "no longer to be laughed at," Poe writes; it has "assumed the majesty of a science."¹²⁵ Some of the practice's "earliest and most violent opposers have been converted to its doctrines," and, at a single lecture in Scotland, Spurzheim "is said to have gained five hundred converts to Phrenology, and the Northern Athens [Edinburgh] is now the strong hold of the faith." It had become, he writes, "very extensively accredited in Germany, in France, in Scotland, and in both Americas... Phrenology is no longer to be laughed at. It *is* no longer laughed at by men of common understanding. It has assumed the majesty of a science; and, as a science, ranks among the most important which can engage the attention of thinking beings." Some of the practice's "earliest and most violent opposers have been converted

¹²⁵ In his essay "Poe and Phrenology," Edward Hungerford finds in the author "no definite indication of any concern with the subject before 1836" (Hungerford, 212). Yet perverseness is alive in Poe since his earliest writing. In "Metzengerstein," the first tale attributed with certainty to Poe, the narrator describes the manner in which the protagonist's "perverse attachment to his lately-acquired charger — an attachment which seemed to attain new strength from every fresh example of the animal's ferocious and demon-like propensities — at length became, in the eyes of all reasonable men, a hideous and unnatural fervor" (Tales, 26). The narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) recalls Roderick Usher's "long improvised dirges" that "will ring forever in my ears. Among other things, I hold painfully in mind a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber" (Tales, 405). Legrand of "The Gold Bug" (1843) is "well educated, with unusual powers of mind, but infected with misanthropy, and subject to perverse moods of alternate enthusiasm and melancholy" (Tales, 807).

to its doctrines,” and, at a single lecture in Scotland, Spurzheim “is said to have gained five hundred converts to Phrenology, and the Northern Athens [Edinburgh] is now the strong hold of the faith” (ER, 329). Here, even as Poe affords phrenology the lofty perch of a hard science, it also takes on the structure of a religious sect, gaining “converts” through preaching of the word by apostles versed in its “doctrines.”

Poe praises Miles’s discussion of “Combateness” – the faculty of self-defense – for including the “very sensible and necessary observation” that the “possession of particular and instinctive propensities” does not acquit us of “responsibility in the indulgences of culpable actions. On the contrary it is the perversion of our faculties which causes the greatest misery we endure, and for which (having the free exercise of *reason*) we are accountable to God.”¹²⁶ In a move characteristic of midcentury natural theology, Poe follows Miles in making science subordinate to, and evidence for, an intelligent design that forecasts judgment in the hereafter. If we let our faculties be perverted, without counteracting this maleficent influence through the proper use of “*reason*” and “moral sentiments,” we might, simply stated, end up in hell.¹²⁷

While combateness is an inherent faculty of human nature, in its proper state this faculty will lead to right action. In this form, phrenology treats natural law as juridical law. Rational agents can break natural laws. Here, the design of nature is less a precise Newtonian mechanism than a jurisprudential monarchy of universal scope. There is no phrenological faculty of abnormality; when the normal faculties are perverted, we

¹²⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G.R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 329. Further citations from this volume will be given parenthetically in the text as ER.

¹²⁷ As Miles explains, “it is held to be the obvious design of the Author of Nature, that the merely animal propensities should be in subjection to the intellectual faculties, and these again regulated and governed by the moral sentiments” (Miles, 21).

must normalize those perversions through a “free exercise of *reason*.” It is because of this ostensible power to regulate the faculties through observation and self-control that Poe posits phrenology’s “most direct, and, perhaps, most salutary” use “is that of *self-examination* and *self-knowledge*. It is contended that, with proper caution, and well-directed inquiry, individuals may obtain, through the science, a perfectly accurate estimate of their own moral capabilities—and, thus instructed, will be the better fitted for decisions in regard to a choice of offices and duties in life” (ER, 329).

In “The Black Cat” (1843) and “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845), Poe subjects this hopeful phrenological futurity to a grim reversal. Rather exposing “their own moral capacities” and utilizing that knowledge to practical advantage, in these tales Poe’s narrators peer inward at an abyssal gap in the structure of the psyche and the universe. Instead of self-development or moral awakening, these tales narrate the mingling of their narrators’ insatiable gaze with their inscrutable objects of inquiry.

Poe first explicitly theorizes the perverse in “The Black Cat,” where the narrator defines it as an “unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself* – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only” (T, 852, Poe’s italics). It is marked by an elemental yet fundamentally inexplicable status: “Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart – one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which gives direction to the character of Man” (T, 852). Here, it is not that a faculty is perverted – instead, perverseness is a faculty *unto itself*. It is, not, however, a faculty that operates in the positive furtherance of a goal, or towards the attainment of any object, since it is manifest as “a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best

judgment, to violate that which is *Law*, merely because we understand it to be such” (T, 852). Perverseness is, in other words, a faculty of negation – a faculty *of violation*, not a violated faculty.

And yet, it’s important to be precise about what the narrator of “The Black Cat” takes to be the act precipitated by perverseness. The narrator grows dependent on alcohol, and, through the “instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance,” offers “personal violence” to his wife, and begins “maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog” (T, 851). Finally, the narrator turns his aggression against Pluto: returning from a debauch, “I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame” (T, 851). It would be easy and sensible to conflate the impetus imparted by this “demon” with the imp of this and the later tale, and yet the two monsters operate on different logics. Alcohol is directly ascribed as motivating his attacks on his wife, his domestic menagerie, and Pluto – but, in this last case, only *after* he has been provoked into a rage. The narrator’s initial “violence,” on the other hand – his seizure of Pluto – takes place when he perceives that the cat shrinks from his presence.

This becomes clearer in the next episode: after he gouges Pluto’s eye out, the cat, “as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach.” The narrator has enough of his “old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of Perverseness.” This

impulse “urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted on the unoffending brute.” In sharp contrast to the “fiendish malevolence” that “thrilled” him while maiming the cat, he hangs it “in cool blood.”¹²⁸ And all this “*because* I knew it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence; – hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin – a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it – if such a thing were possible – even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.” As in the “Phrenology” article, the narrator is both “responsible” and “accountable” to God for his transgression. The difference is that, in this case, he lacks the “free exercise of *reason*.” Here, the perverse figures as an agent of self-reproach – the narrator, already feeling himself already unworthy of divine mercy, commits a crime so egregious that it, in his own eyes, renders him unredeemably damned. By cutting out Pluto’s eye, he’s punishing the cat for its betrayal; by hanging Pluto, he’s punishing himself for punishing the cat. Yet this is not a free or rational or autonomous choice. After all, “Have we not,” the narrator asks, “a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is *Law*, merely because we understand it to be such?” (T, 852).

In “The Imp of the Perverse,” Poe again invokes “Combativeness” as the impulse to “self-defence. It is our safeguard against injury. Its principle regards our well-being.”

¹²⁸ The narrator further externalizes his alcoholism into a force that acts upon him by asserting that “my disease grew upon me – for what disease is like alcohol!” (Tales, 851). If alcohol does not precisely conjure the “imp of the perverse,” perhaps this is because Poe identifies it with the imp’s jocular doppelganger, “The Angel of the Odd,” who in the story of that name is “the genius who presided over the *contretemps* of mankind, and whose business it was to bring about the *odd accidents* which are continually astonishing the skeptic” (Tales, 1104). If the imp of the perverse is an internal principle, the angel of the odd visits from without. In this sense we might see the two figures in the same light Paul de Man casts on allegory (the angel) and irony (the imp) – the first places a stable subject in an unstable situation; the second reveals the internal division of the subject by unveiling the inhuman double inside of him, as part of the constitution of his “self.”

Against this conception, the narrator claims, “in the case of that something which I term *perverseness*, the desire to be well is not only not aroused, but a strongly antagonistical sentiment exists” (T, 1221, Poe’s italics). The “phrenologists,” and “all the moralists who have preceded them,” have neglected the faculty due to its seeming “supererogation. We saw no *need* of the impulse – for the propensity. We could not perceive its necessity” since it fails to further “the objects of humanity, either temporal or eternal” (T, 1219, Poe’s italics). These thinkers are guilty of “deducing and establishing every thing from the preconceived destiny of man.” In attempting to decode the divine design of nature from a readymade key, phrenology has broken its own rules: “Induction, *à posteriori*, would have brought phrenology to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something” (T, 1220). Though the perverse remains always in excess of explanation, its existence can be verified inductively – it can be observed in its effects – even though its origin remains unreachable: Poe writes, “No one who trustingly consults and thoroughly questions his own soul, will be disposed to deny the entire *radicalness* of the propensity in question. It is not more *incomprehensible* than distinctive” (T, 1221, my italics). The perverse will not “admit of analysis, or resolution into ulterior elements” (T, 1221). Poe asks us to mark its incomprehensibility – in other words, perverseness becomes legible only insofar as its illegibility is made stark. What fails is, precisely, *analysis*. The perverse seems to be made up of nothing, to be irreducible. It cannot be broken into its component parts. The perverse, like analysis itself, is a faculty that refuses to be analyzed.

The year before “The Imp of the Perverse” was published, Poe decried “the assumption that we, being men, will, in general, be *deliberately* true. The greater amount

of truth is impulsively uttered... But, in examining the historic material, we leave these considerations out of sight. We dote upon records which, in the main, lie; while we discard the *Kabbala*, which, properly interpreted, do *not*" (ER, 1322, Poe's italics). Interestingly, though Poe asserts that the *Kabala* does not lie, he does not imbue it with the positive quality of truth-telling. If it is "properly interpreted," scripture will not necessarily provide easy answers or foundations we can rest on; indeed, the implication seems to be that an interpretation that gives the last word to "historical material" and "records" will yield a harvest of falsity. In another entry of the same "Marginalia," Poe laments that the defenders of an unspecified work "uphold it on the ground of its truthfulness" (ER, 1330). For Poe, "this truthfulness is the one overwhelming defect... In my view, if an artist must paint decayed cheeses, is [sic] merit will lie in their looking as little like decayed cheeses as possible" (ER, 1330). The uglier the "truth" is, the less good art will be responsible to represent it. What Poe describes as proper interpretation might not render unalloyed truthfulness – since truthfulness can be an "overwhelming defect" – but it will not render deception. The question, then, is what kind of truth is being told. Or, if the scriptures don't tell the truth, what *do* they tell, if they don't lie? For Poe, their truth, such as it is, comes through the expression of supernal beauty, which he figures as "that elastic *Hope* which is the Harbinger and Eos of all. Man's real life is happy, chiefly because he is ever expecting that it soon will be so" (ER, 1335, Poe's italics).

Eureka: Sisyphus and Tantalus Paraphrase the Universe

After 1845, Poe struggles to formulate a method of knowing irreducible to scientific experiment. In "The Colloquy of Monos & Una," he describes a kind of "poetic intellect – that intellect which we now feel to have been the most exalted of all," a style

of thought that facilitates revelations alien to “unaided reason.” Even Dupin – the analyst whose seemingly intuitive leaps are actually sound method – anticipates the shadowy irrationality Poe would finally champion: Speaking of Epicurus’s theory of atomism, he says, “how singularly, yet with how little notice, the vague guesses of that noble Greek had met with confirmation in the late nebular cosmogony” (T, 536).

One of the key arguments of *Eureka* is that Enlightenment science owes its origin, not to logic or reason, but to an act of poetic imagination. Kepler was, at his most groundbreaking, not a scientist at all; he did not reason his way toward his laws. “Newton deduced [the theory of gravity] from the laws of Kepler. Kepler admitted that these laws he *guessed*... [T]hese laws whose investigation disclosed to the greatest of British astronomers that principle, the basis of all (existing) physical principle, in going behind which we enter at once the nebulous kingdom of Metaphysics. Yes! – these vital laws Kepler *guessed* – that is to say, he *imagined* them.”¹²⁹ *Eureka*’s “general proposition” is that, “*In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation*” (Eu, 7, Poe’s italics). Its “legitimate thesis,” somewhat puzzlingly, is “*The Universe*” (Eu, 16, Poe’s italics). Yet neither of these, for Poe, the book’s epistemological gambit. Rather, Poe writes, “an intuition altogether irresistible, although inexpressible, forces me to the conclusion that what God originally created—that that Matter which, by dint of his Volition, he first made from his Spirit, or from Nihility, *could* have been nothing but Matter in its utmost conceivable state of – what? – of *Simplicity*” (Eu, 22). God first created a perfect simplicity, and then splintered it into plurality – which is the universe of relation we recognize. Simplicity,

¹²⁹ Edgar Allen Poe, *Eureka* ed. Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine (Urbana: Illinois UP, 2004). Further citations will be given in parenthetically in the text as Eu.

Poe says, is the sole assumption in the book. Yet, he claims, it follows a “train of ratiocination as rigorously logical as that which establishes any demonstration in Euclid.” “Nothing was every more certainly—no human conclusion was ever, in fact, more regularly – more rigorously *deduced*: – but, alas! the processes lie out of the human analysis—at all events are beyond the utterance of the human tongue” (Eu, 22). Like the perverse, simplicity is not susceptible to analysis. But in *Eureka*, Poe holds up simplicity precisely as his own Keplerian guess – or, put another way, as a hypothesis. Poe hedges his bets about the content of intuition, describing it as, perhaps, “*the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression*” (Eu, 22, Poe’s italics).

The central themes and gambits of Poe’s cosmology seem simple enough, but the work as a whole proves relentlessly resistant to paraphrase. Poe frames his ostentatious lay-scientific demonstrations as an alternative to, and a correction of, the cosmological musing of Alexander von Humboldt’s *Cosmos*. The book’s “legitimate thesis,” Poe says, simply but puzzlingly, is “*The Universe*” (Eu, 16, Poe’s italics). The “general proposition” of the prose-poem is that, “*In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation*” (Eu, 7, Poe’s italics). The book offers a creation myth in which an originally unified, undifferentiated godhead disperses itself throughout the cosmos in the form of differentiated matter. This matter – which is the whole of creation as we are capable of understanding it – yearns to be recombined into this primordial state that preexisted creation, “the absolute and final Union of all” (Eu, 44). This unimaginable state is outside

space and time – in it, neither relation nor matter exists. This entails the destruction of the physical universe of space, and the end of times. Thus, *Eureka* essays the alpha of Genesis and Revelation's omega in the span of a hundred pages.

The atomic desire to return is figured as attraction, or, equivalently, as the Newtonian principle of gravitation. Gravity, Poe writes, is “the expression of a *desire* on the part of matter” (Eu, 43-44, my italics). After the initial moment of creation, in which matter is dispersed to the ends of the universe, atoms feel an intractable pull from every other atom in existence. Left to their own devices, these atoms – the individual units that together make up the universe of relation – would agglomerate, merge, and rejoin one another in the unity that preceded creation. This Poe refers to as the “state of progressive collapse,” since, as he says, the “tendency to collapse’ and ‘the attraction of gravitation’ are convertible phrases” (Eu, 95). The completion of the work of attraction, then, is the demobilization of all attraction.

However, since the “ultimate design” of the divine creation is the “*utmost possible relation*” – “*Multiplicity* is the object” – this atomic desire must be thwarted. To this end, Poe proposes the “necessity for a repulsion of limited capacity – a separative *something*” to keep atoms apart (Eu, 26). Repulsion is the force “which we have been in the practice of designating now as heat, now as magnetism, now as *electricity*; displaying our ignorance of its awful character in the vacillation of the phraseology with which we endeavor to circumscribe it” (Eu, 27, Poe's italics). This force exists to keep all atoms, no matter how close in proximity they come, from establishing any positive contact with one another: “Man neither employs, nor knows, a force sufficient to bring two atoms into contact. This is but the well-established proposition of the impenetrability of matter” (Eu,

26-27). This impenetrability is both evident to observation and an irreducible property of all material existence.

Attraction and repulsion are not mere intensive properties or forces that act on matter from without. On the contrary, for Poe, “Matter *exists* only as Attraction and Repulsion... Attraction and Repulsion *are* Matter” (Eu, 28). All positive, material creation, then, is constituted of a desire (to unite) and a prohibition forbidding the consummation of that desire (repulsion). In this scheme, “each atom attracts – sympathizes with the most delicate movements of every other atom, and with each and with all at the same time, and forever,” and forever frustrated by the “separative something” of electricity (Eu, 32). And yet, positioned at the end of this infinite “forever,” it remains the case that “*absolute* consolidation is *to come*” (Eu, 72). The idea of this consolidation, the consummation of matter’s collapse, carries with it “the startling thought” of creation’s “instantaneous disappearance” (Eu, 101). The “majestic remnants of the tribe of Stars flash, at length, into a common embrace,” at which point the “inevitable catastrophe is at hand” (Eu, 100).

“But this catastrophe,” Poe asks, “– what is it?” (Eu, 101). Poe’s use of “catastrophe,” as opposed to the more conventional or orthodox “revelation” or “apocalypse,” is fitting in a couple of senses. First, catastrophe is, in dramaturgical terms, the “change or revolution, which produces the conclusion or final event of a dramatic piece” (Johnson on Shakespeare, 259). This reflects what Aristotle writes of the “ending,” which is “whatever itself is naturally after something else... but has nothing else after itself” (Poetics, 547). Second, at the end of Poe’s universe, nothing is *revealed*. There is no “apocalypse” in the sense that nothing is brought to light, nothing revealed to

human eyes for the first time. Instead, creation regresses into “Material Nihilism,” “that Nothingness which, to all finite perception, Unity must be” (Eu, 103). At this point, “God will remain all in all” (Eu, 103). So, instead of a veil being lifted, with the theatrical “catastrophe,” a curtain falls. Ultimately *Eureka* suggests that unity, the cosmic godhead that stands as the alpha and omega of Poe’s cosmology, can be invoked glancingly, suggested by art, but only realized by the end of days, without a last trump or a final judgment, but only a winking out of light, and a closing of all temporally- and spatially-bound eyes. In this vision of ending, unity entirely subsumes particularity, and with it, particularity’s particular instantiations – for instance, humanity. It is not to the end of the world or the extinction of man alone – cataclysms already inconceivable in scope – but the end of the created universe in its entirety, from one edge of space to the other.

And yet here, where the work is at its bleakest, and seemingly at its most indifferent to human concerns, Poe backdoors in a kind of a concept of immortality through rebirth: “we can readily conceive that a new and perhaps totally different series of conditions may ensue – another creation... another action and reaction of the Divine Will” (Eu, 103). This new creation is temporary, but the tendency is renewable and, ultimately, endless: “are we not, indeed, more than justified in entertaining a belief – let us say, rather, in indulging a hope – that the process we have here ventured to contemplate will be renewed forever, and forever, and forever; a novel Universe swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine?” (Eu, 103). The rhetorical register has shifted from scientific ratiocination to a faith-based whimsicality, “indulging a hope” rather than proving a point.

Here, the pattern of God's recurrent creations and destructions is analogous to the structure of conscious suffering and unconscious oblivion articulated in Poe's letter to Eveleth. Poe's own tribulations can be viewed as occupying a synecdochial relationship with God's. Individual difference, even individuality itself, is leveled by its inclusion in a "family" that transcends phylum and genus. Matthew Taylor has noted a potentially troubling anti-humanism of Poe's cosmology: *Eureka* denies any special character, specificity, or privilege to the "human." Poe writes, "All these creatures – *all* – those whom you term animate, as well as those to which you deny life for no better reason than that you do not behold it in operation," are "more or less, and more or less obviously conscious Intelligences; conscious, first, of a proper identity; conscious, secondly and by faint indeterminate glimpses, of an identity with the Divine Being of whom we speak – of an identity with God" (Eu, 106). Startlingly, rocks, dust, and ash are "conscious" of a "proper identity," and if they differ in this respect from humans, they do so only in degree – "more or less." (Poe does not specify whether only agglomerated masses of atoms have this identity, or whether, and more bafflingly, *each individual atom* is self-conscious.) However, the nature of this leveling is significant: in the case of each atom or cluster of matter, "*Difference* is their character – their essentiality – just as *no-difference* was the essentiality of their source" (Eu, 27). In other words, all "creatures," all atoms, have an "identity with God" in a meaningful sense only insofar as God has crumbled himself into the macadam of creation. Pre-creation and post-cataclysm, God could not be said to be

“aware of identity,” since God is singular, and there is no possibility of reflexivity in an undifferentiated oneness.¹³⁰

So, this sameness-in-difference cuts both ways: man shares with all things a fundamental and un-transcendable inability to come into positive contact with *anything*, to eradicate the boundary between itself and its other; yet, in sharing the same situation of alienated differentiation, each atom is in a kind of harmony with every other. So, if each atom is a part of the “cosmical family,” it is also the case that each atom constitutes a *sui generis* race unto itself. This dispersal of intelligence, from “Mankind” to the suprahuman, “cosmical” order of familial relativity, is especially significant in light of the way Poe later describes repulsion: “To electricity – so, for the present, continuing to call it – we *may* not be wrong in referring the various physical appearances of light, heat and magnetism; but far less shall we be liable to err in attributing to this strictly spiritual principle the more important phenomena of vitality, consciousness and *Thought*” (Eu, 28). Poe has equated attraction with desire – the yearning to return – and here equates repulsion with consciousness. In other words, the very force that stifles the desire towards unity is awareness, cognition, “consciousness” itself. Further, the “creatures” Poe spoke of are “conscious Intelligences” insofar as they enact repulsion. Thought itself, in other words, is the frustration of desire; attraction, as the desire to reunite, is necessarily the desire to annihilate thought. Poe has purged the phrenological taxonomy of faculties into a bare, minimalist shell of itself. There are only two faculties – attraction and repulsion, or (synonymously) desire and thought – and each entails stifling the other. So relation –

¹³⁰ John Irwin has discussed splitting and doubling, and especially the necessity of doubleness for reflection, in some detail in *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980).

creation itself – becomes, and is a product of, the “longing of the soul to vex itself.”

Creation is coterminous with alienation, frustration, and pain.

To further this point, Poe maintains that there can be no more happiness extant than the happiness God feels in his primordial Unity – the “absolute amount of happiness remain[s] always the same” (Eu, 105). Whether in its original unity or in the created state of diffusion, it is not in the “power of this Being – any more than it is in your own – to extend, by actual increase, the joy of his Existence; but just as it is in your power to expand or to concentrate your pleasures (the absolute amount of happiness remaining always the same) so did and does a similar capability appertain to this Divine Being,” (Eu, 105). No matter how he manifests himself, god cannot make himself happier. And yet, from this it follows that the creation is both the diffusion of divine pleasure and the creation of divine pain. God, finding his primordial unity and presumably perfect happiness unfulfilling, fractures his happiness into “expansive existence” out of, perhaps, a craving for novelty – perhaps a craving for suffering (Eu, 106). Poe does not presume to psychoanalyze God on this score, and indeed, it is difficult to fathom just how unreasonable the motive of creation seems – at least in human terms – from this perspective.

Eureka’s creation-myth involves the enactment of a masochistic compulsion – a compulsion that is already embedded in the godhead even when recumbent in its perfectly happy consolidation.¹³¹ In the state of things as we experience them, in their utmost relation, god “feels his life through an infinity of imperfect pleasures – the partial

¹³¹ See Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

and pain-intertangled pleasures of those inconceivably numerous things which you designate as his creatures, but which are really but infinite individualizations of Himself” (Eu, 106). This creation of pain, which is equivalent to the introduction of relation and non-identity into the fabric of existence, is also the creation of a desire for the alleviation of that pain. So while it is the case that each individual atom is an “individualization” of god, it’s also true that the source of each individual atom “lies in the principle, *Unity*” (Eu, 34). Though there is a certain pantheistic flavor to the assertion that each creature is a particle of god, this is complicated by the fact that god, insofar as he *is* each creature, is trying to *become* something he’s not – the unity that is each atom’s “lost parent. *This* they seek always – immediately – in all directions – wherever it is even partially to be found; thus appeasing, in some measure, the ineradicable tendency, while on the way to its absolute satisfaction in the end” (Eu, 34). In this notion of gravitation, all particles are attracted to all other particles, and desire nothing other than an ultimate merger into one being – the divine unity that preceded creation. Yet the desire for contact – the “ineradicable tendency” – can only be appeased “in some measure,” palliated but not cured. The “absolute satisfaction” only comes in the end, after the catastrophe (after the ending after which there can be nothing), with the destruction of the universe and the abolition of creation – and with it, the abolition of the desire that is erased the moment it is satisfied.

This divine peccadillo – the desire to experience pain – isn’t, in Poe’s cosmology, morally neutral, since the “absolute, irrelative particle primarily created by the Volition of God, must have been in a condition of positive *normality*, or rightfulness – for wrongfulness implies *relation*. Right is positive; wrong is negative – is merely the

negation of right; as cold is the negation of heat – darkness of light” (Eu, 44). In other words, before the act of diffusion – the moment of creation that has been compared to the Big Bang – *things* do not exist, but what *does* exist, irrelationality itself, is ethically perfect. This view of the godhead also implies violence, insofar as creation involves “*forcing* the originally and therefore normally *One* into the abnormal condition of *Many*,” which is also to say, “forcing the normal into the abnormal – of impelling that whose originality, and therefore whose rightful condition, was *One*, to take upon itself the wrongful condition of *Many*” (Eu, 23, 68). Poe’s schematic view of morality entails a syllogism the implications of which he doesn’t fully flesh out in his treatise: If unity is (equivalent to) right and relation is (equivalent to) wrong, and if the divine creation is the creation of relation, then the divine creation is also the creation of wrong. In positing “the idea of *the utmost possible Relation* as the Omnipotent design,” Poe is also positing the creation of the utmost possible wrongness as the Omnipotent design (Eu, 71).

However, this isn’t precisely to say that the creation of the universe is wrong – rather, it is the creation of the very condition that makes wrongfulness itself possible. “That a thing may be wrong, it is necessary that there be some other thing in *relation* to which it *is* wrong – some condition which it fails to satisfy; some law which it violates; some being whom it aggrieves” (Eu, 44-45). Relation, and with it creation, are the constitutive conditions for a violation of the law, and a grief to the “being” that preceded them. The very principle of creation negates the possibility of the consummation of this desire. Every atom’s desire is frustrated – vexed – by its countervailing urge, repulsion, and this frustration “aggrieves” the being that suffers it. The Fall, for Poe, is not due to the willful rebellion of man or seraph, and does not result in the estrangement of

subjective beings from a former state of closeness or fidelity with the godhead. Rather, the fall is coterminous with creation itself. To speak of the post-lapsarian universe is, simply, to speak of the universe, as it exists and has always existed, since the literal beginning of time. Yet this is not to suggest that Poe's vision of the cosmos is anti-humanist, nihilistic, or malevolent; evil for Poe is not an end in itself, but a product of what can only be described as a divine compulsion – in fact, a divine perversion. The structure of Poe's creation, as narrated in *Eureka*, ultimately offers mankind universal absolution. There is no primordial sin for man to repent, and so no punishment for him to dread beyond the pale. In Poe's universe, by merit of the fact that every man is among the fallen, he bears no responsibility for the fall.

The mere fact of material existence – of being imbued with the gravitational desire and the repulsive frustration of that desire – is, insofar as repulsion is equivalent to consciousness, already to have the knowledge of good and evil. Since consciousness, for Poe, is equivalent to repulsion, and repulsion is responsible for preserving relation, consciousness *itself* involves a divinely ordained injunction to participate in a state of absolute wrongness that last precisely as long as creation itself. Knowledge of good and evil isn't a byproduct of an action – rather, insofar as “wrongness” and “evil” are equivalent, knowledge itself is coterminous with evil.

It is well established that in *Eureka* Poe elides the boundary between science and philosophy, but more radical is his collapsing of orthodoxy and atheism. In endowing his God with the compulsive tendencies we now associate with obsessional neurosis, Poe imagines a fallen universe; and yet, for Poe, the fall isn't the transition from Edenic utopia to post-lapsarian guilt, but is instead concurrent with the creation of the universe.

When God created the world, it was a sinless place – thence the Fall. But in Poe’s schema of the universe, humans are absolved of original sin by the same gesture that it is bestowed upon them, without requiring the intervention of a benevolent savior. For Poe, all humanity is perverse, because all creation is perverse – the soul has a tendency to vex itself because the spiritual unity of the godhead has already vexed itself. Ultimately, in his deterministic, scientifically Calvinistic cosmos, creation is the founding perversity and the ultimate perversion. In engendering the universe, God causes an ineluctable chain of self-vexing, self-defeating, and self-negating that continues unabated until the catastrophe – a cataclysmic, eschatological pseudo-revelation, an end of the universe that reveals *nothing*. There is no heaven or hell – there is only (bad) relation and (good, but effectively non-existence) irrelation.

So, in “The Imp of the Perverse” and “The Black Cat,” the perverse is theorized as an essential and omnipresent faculty of the soul. Finally, in *Eureka*, it becomes a characteristic of divinity itself, and a predicate of creation; perverseness becomes embedded in the very structure of the universe. Yet perhaps more intriguingly, the perverse tendency also becomes more pronounced as the universe’s conscious “creatures,” human or not, become more highly evolved. We catch earlier glimpses of a kind of man-beyond-man earlier in the book. In a vatic, speculative voice Poe muses, “we should not be unwarranted in the fancy that the discharge of yet a new planet... may give rise to yet a new modification of the terrestrial surface – a modification from which may spring a race both materially and spiritually superior to Man” (Eu, 65). Again, Poe has it both ways – this race would be “superior” to humanity only by merit of suffering more attraction and being stifled, correspondingly, by more repulsion. So *Eureka*’s theory of

“progressive collapse” – itself a phrase rich in paradox – is also a theory of evolution with an ambivalent stance towards teleology. Poe writes,

The human brain has obviously a leaning to the ‘*Infinite*,’ and fondles the phantom of the idea. It seems to long with a passionate fervor for this impossible conception, with the hope of intellectually believing it when conceived. What is general among the whole race of Man, of course no individual of that race can be warranted in considering abnormal; nevertheless, there *may* be a class of superior intelligences, to whom the human bias alluded to may wear all the character of monomania (Eu, 77, Poe’s italics).

This is the (speculative) perverted superman, whose monomaniacal fixation with the infinite is nothing but an indication of the concentrated density spirit. The more repulsion, the more perversion, the more evolution – the more consciousness. In this way, Poe gives us a strange revision of the theory of teleological evolution, or evolution with an ultimate end in mind. Poe’s teleology hinges on the idea of collapse and annihilation. Attraction is the tendency to collapse; repulsion is the corresponding inability to do so. Larger bodies, larger agglomerations of matter, will have a corresponding largeness of the repulsive (perverse) impulse.

Repulsion, we recall, is the “strictly spiritual principle” of “vitality, consciousness and *Thought*” (Eu, 28). Poe writes, “let us understand the systems – let us understand each star, with its attendant planets – as but a Titanic atom existing in space with precisely the same inclination for Unity which characterized, in the beginning, the actual atoms” (Eu, 100). These “system-atoms,” at least heuristically, take on the properties of an individual atom – therefore an individual consciousness (Eu, 100). Yet they retain the repulsive force of the swirl of atoms comprising them, and are charged with “a million-fold electric velocity, commensurate only with their material grandeur and with their spiritual passion for oneness” (Eu, 100). Here are massive, blazing stars, radiating with a passionate and erotic longing for consummation. The image is “laughable” and “pathetic”

only to the extent that it attempts to sustain an experience of sublimity beyond the capacities of the reader.

As repulsion increases, so consciousness increases with it, since consciousness “is merely in the development of this Ether [the repulsive force], through heterogeneity, that particular masses of Matter become animate – sensitive – and in the ratio of their heterogeneity; – some reaching a degree of sensitiveness involving what we call *Thought* and thus attaining obviously Conscious Intelligence” (Eu, 101). As matter clusters together and is frenzied by the desire to merge into oneness, a corresponding amount of repulsion is there to stifle that desire, to make consummation impossible. As desire – attraction – strengthens, and as the object of fulfillment is approached, it slips further and further away, asymptotically, like Zeno’s tortoise eternally outpacing Achilles. The “*development of the terrestrial vitality proceeds as the terrestrial condensation*” (Eu, 65). The more matter is assembled, the more “vitality” is produced: “these phenomena, whether observed generally or in detail, seem to proceed *at least in the ratio of the heterogeneous*” (Eu, 28). And since each atom is different – “*no two bodies are absolutely alike*” – increasing aggregation of atoms leads directly to higher, or at least *more*, consciousness (Eu, 28). As particles are brought into close proximity, electricity, and therefore “consciousness and *Thought*,” is concentrated (Eu, 28).

How does Poe know any of this? In a sense, he doesn’t – not if “knowledge” means anything rigorous or even conventional. He has replaced the rigorous fantasy of “analysis” and “composition” with a new, poetic mode of cognition that, instead of supporting itself with scientific rhetoric, actually competes with that rhetoric. The turning

point late in Poe's career is nothing more or less than a new comfort with theoretical speculation. In a letter, published in 1848, Poe writes,

the objections of *merely* scientific men – men, I mean, who cultivate the physical sciences to the exclusion, in a greater or less degree, of the mathematics, of metaphysics and of logic – are generally invalid except in respect to scientific *details*. Of all persons in the world, they are at the same time the most bigoted and the least capable of using, generalizing, or deciding upon the facts which they bring to light in the course of their experiments. And these are the men who chiefly write the criticisms *against* all efforts at generalization – denouncing these efforts as 'speculative' and 'theoretical' (Letters, 2:363).

Poe invokes science in order to give his criticism the sheen of validity, but he also critiques scientific discourse in order to subordinate it to art. Perhaps more importantly, he gradually comes to see hypothesis formation – in the loose sense of telling a plausible story about a set of facts, offering an explanation for a range of data – as the lynchpin between poetry and science. Intuitive mastery and expertise are legitimated through similar processes: each appeals to some extra-personal font of authority that vouchsafes the specialness of the knower's knowledge. In a sense, the difference springs from their divergent *sources* of abstract authority. The expert aims to synthesize that which is already known to a certainty, to cobble together the bits of truth that have been deemed useful by the curators of the discursive domain. The expert's role is to solve a problem by applying the tools, tricks, and techniques developed by and shared between her clique's credentialed operators. The cliqueless genius, on the other hand, creates a *new* problem, often shattering our complacent acceptance of conventions, dismantling ossified hierarchies, and unmasking specialized education as a baroque form of self-deception along the way.

In this, Poe anticipates Charles S. Peirce's concept of "abduction" – a type of thought irreducible to induction and deduction, but no less fundamental to "knowing."

“Abduction” is, Peirce’s sense, intuitive, improvisatory thinking – or, as Peirce was fond of putting it, “guessing.” Through the successful application of abduction, he writes, “those problems that at first blush appear utterly insoluble receive, in that very circumstance, as Edgar Poe remarked in his ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue,’ their smoothly-fitting keys” (Peirce, 362).

CHAPTER TWO

IRONY AS EXPERTISE:

SHELL-GAME NARRATION IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *THE CONFIDENCE-MAN*

"A society which believes it has dispensed with masks can only be a society in which masks, more powerful than ever before, the better to deceive men, will themselves be masked."

-Claude Lévi-Strauss

"Let us treat the men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are. Men live in their fancy, like drunkards whose hands are too soft and tremulous for successful labor."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

"You do not know, you cannot determine scientifically, that I will not steal your money or your spoons."

-William I. Thomas

In the 1850s, Gustave Flaubert invented the modern novel, and with it, the modern novelist; or, at any rate, he has been consecrated in criticism as a Promethean figure whose theft of fire was *Madame Bovary*. Critics and theorists habitually take that novel to mark a historical break between the novel's past and present, and to inaugurate the tradition that is our Western cultural inheritance.¹³² For Mario Vargas Llosa, "Flaubert was the first modern novelist," and for Julian Barnes, "*Madame Bovary* is the first truly modern novel."¹³³ More colorfully, James Wood argues, "Novelists should thank Flaubert the way poets thank spring: it all begins again with him. There really is a

¹³² In a famous essay on Flaubert's style, Proust accounts for his predecessor's innovativeness in terms of grammar and syntax: Flaubert, "through the entirely new and personal use he made of the definite and indefinite past tenses, of the present participle, of certain pronouns and prepositions, has renewed our vision of things almost as much as Kant, with his Categories, renewed theories of Knowledge and of the Reality of the external world" (CC, 148).

¹³³ Mario Vargas Llosa, "Flaubert, Our Contemporary," trans. John King, in *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*, ed. Timothy Unwin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 15; Julian Barnes, "The Art of Fiction No. 165," interview by Shusha Guppy, available at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/562/the-art-of-fiction-no-165-julian-barnes>

time before Flaubert and after him.”¹³⁴ These accounts suggest that, in a crucial sense, Flaubert inaugurated novel writing as a distinctive kind of labor; he was the prototype, the novelist who set the pattern and articulated the techniques and values by which aspiring novelists could achieve legitimacy in a field that was no longer legitimized by classical conventions or aristocratic values.

Flaubert, then, occupies a central but uneasy position in the history of literary autonomy: one foot in professionalization, the other in the lyric obscurity of modernism, his novels (and his correspondence’s ingenious aesthetic theories) helped set the conventions of realism and naturalism even as they provided an impetus for symbolists and aesthetes who laid siege to those same conventions. Emile Zola saw in *Madame Bovary* the blueprint for a scientific literature that might master reality, as it were, objectively; other readers, like Vladimir Nabokov, championed the book as an authoritative satire of the bourgeois culture that produced it, but which it transcended.

Paradoxically, though, claims for Flaubert’s import as an originator and ancestor of later literary specialists, whether modernist poets or realist novelists, are predicated on his problematization of authority, legitimacy, and transparency. André Brink sees, throughout *Madame Bovary*, the distinctively “modernist approach with which Flaubert, together with Mallarmé and Rimbaud, so radically shifted our appreciation of literature and its implication in language” – an approach characterized by “despair of language and its incapability of communicating adequately the private perception and experience.” Flaubert’s novel understands language to be “primarily unreliable and defective,” and the

¹³⁴ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. 32.

narrative's "claims to authority are subverted in every fibre of its own narration."¹³⁵

Similarly, Flaubert's artistic achievement is, as far as Lawrence R. Schehr can tell, indistinguishable from his utter transvaluation of abject artistic failure, or rather, his thematization of artistic failure:

The success of Flaubert's writing is in the fact that it attains total failure: there can be no hermeneutic code, there can be no interpretation, nor can there be any successful evocation of an object in time and space. The more precise the descriptions seem to become, the more they are accidental and contingent. Values and meaning collapse at the level of the writing, as it begins to reproduce the collapse of meaning and values for the characters. In the end, there is no solution but to go on, endlessly, working at doing nothing.¹³⁶

Flaubert's style, and the style of *Madame Bovary* specifically, might then be described in R.W.B. Lewis's terms as "self-cancelling prose"; its sentences "modify, hesitantly contradict, and then utterly cancel one another out, leaving not a rack of positive statement behind."¹³⁷ Lewis is writing, here, not of Flaubert's first novel, but of Herman Melville's last: *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, published the same year *Madame Bovary* was serialized (1856).

The Confidence-Man has been recruited into the ranks of high-modernist indirection, fragmentation, and elusiveness. Virtually everyone who cares about such things agrees that it is a very difficult book indeed; but, even if it is a truism of contemporary criticism that no literary text can, will, or should furnish a finished

¹³⁵ André Brink, *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 129, 139, 146.

¹³⁶ Lawrence R. Schehr, "Flaubert's Failure," in *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*, p. 218.

¹³⁷ R.W.B. Lewis, *Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 65. From the perspective of this discordant tradition "the key American figure of the past [nineteenth] century was Herman Melville, and the key book was *The Confidence-Man*" (209).

interpretation or transcendental signified, critics have still taken pains to point out that *The Confidence-Man*'s ambiguity is unusually – perhaps even uniquely – pervasive, perplexing, and thematically central. For some, the book is not *about* anything other than its own falsehood or artifice.¹³⁸ John G. Cawelti argues that, for Melville's reader, "reality remains unattainable; the moment of seeming truth may be only another mask.... We are left with ambiguity at the heart of things."¹³⁹ According to Peter Bellis, the book "cannot finally be said to provide an authoritative textual center upon which to build a reading," since each scene or dialogue "is either undercut by the circumstances or language of its presentation or revealed as the start of a seemingly infinite interpretive regress."¹⁴⁰ Finally, in Lawrence Buell's estimation, "the main problems of the novel are insoluble" – those problems being "the extent to which it is possible to determine 'meaning' in the novel," and "the precise tone or spirit in which the novel should be read."¹⁴¹

Taken together, two commonalities of these accounts are striking: first, they share an anxiety that *The Confidence-Man* may be no more valuable or edifying than a grim

¹³⁸ Differently valenced versions of this tendency can also be seen in Malcolm Magaw's "*The Confidence-Man* and Christian Deity: Melville's Imagery of Ambiguity," in *Explorations of Literature* ed. Rima Drell Reck (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966): 81-99; Philip Drew's "Appearance and Reality in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*," *ELH*. 31.4 (1964): 418-442; Merlin R. Bowen's "Tactics of Indirection in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*," *Studies in the Novel*. 1.4 (1969): 401-420; and John G. Blair's "Puns and Equivocations in Melville's *The Confidence Man*," *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 22 (1974).

¹³⁹ John G. Cawelti, "Some Notes on the Structure of *The Confidence-Man*," *American Literature*. 27.3 (1957): 278-288, p. 288.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Bellis, "Melville's *Confidence-Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation," *American Literature*. 59.4 (1987): 548-569, p. 568.

¹⁴¹ Lawrence Buell, "The Last Word on *The Confidence-Man*?" *Illinois Quarterly*, 35 (Nov. 1972): 15-29, p. 15.

joke on its reader, whose sustained efforts to understand the book must inevitably be fruitless. Second, they position *The Confidence-Man* as a work of proto-modernism, a kind of self-enclosed symbolist poem made up of unaccountably complex, metaleptic, areferential tropes. The book, then, seems at once a howl of despair and a Dionysian excursion into pure play. If it is valuable in these accounts, its value springs from the painstaking minuteness of Melville's authorial labor, which demands a correspondingly heightened level of attention and effort from the reader who wants even basic comprehension of the text.

The evident lesson of these searchers for deep meaning in *The Confidence-Man* – the key-shaped meaning that might mirror the novel's lock – is that the search cannot but lead into this *trou de loup* of affirming unmeaning as the book's ultimate meaning. But Melville is not Mallarmé, and *The Confidence-Man* was not, or not only, an attempt to create an object of pure art without reference. The literary-historical argument entailed here is not that literary modernism actually begins with American antebellum fiction, but rather that the styles of writing and thinking characteristic of literary modernism did not erupt, fully formed, out of the failed Revolution of 1848; nor was literary modernism ever simply or completely opposed to the other poles – whether populist or simply straightforward or non-experimental – of literary production.

The question of what the book *means* – what kinds of truths it tells – can easily overshadow the more mundane question of what it is *about*. Certainly the novel's referential dimension is obscured by its literary tricksterism. Nina Baym – as erudite and well-traveled a scholar of antebellum literature as any – asserts that the book is “self-reflexive... to a greater degree (so far as I know) than any other American work of its

period.”¹⁴² At this point in his career, Baym argues, fiction is only useful as a vehicle of its author’s increasingly excruciating alienation from the craft of fiction: in it, Melville “bitterly expresses the sort of truth that can be asserted in a mendacious medium and illustrates the convulsed ways in which it can be expressed. But the truths he speaks are only about fiction and language” (921). Though her account of Melville’s “quarrel with fiction” is largely persuasive, Baym’s case obscures the extent to which *The Confidence-Man* is an urgent confrontation of the social conditions and marketplace exigencies of Melville’s day.¹⁴³ I want to insist that self-reflexivity is not the be-all, end-all of *The Confidence-Man*, and that a crucial representational level of the book has gone largely overlooked: its ongoing, dialogic, and vexed debate with professionalization, particularly in terms of intellectual specialization.

The argumentative content of *The Confidence-Man* is not of merely sociological interest, since the book’s argument – what we might call its quarrel with specialization – is embedded in its form. Melville’s and the book’s position is by no means unequivocal; *The Confidence-Man* is not a straightforward critique or repudiation of specialization.

¹⁴² Nina Baym, “Melville’s Quarrel with Fiction,” *PMLA* 94.5 (1979): 909-923, p. 921.

¹⁴³ In spite of its reflexivity and ambiguity, *The Confidence-Man* has often been taken as an urgent investigation of Melville’s social climate and political milieu. It is, R.W.B. Lewis writes, Melville’s “most searching statement about the fatal direction in which America was heading.” Lewis, *Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition* (New Haven: London, 1966) 209. It is not unprecedented, in other words, to see social significance in Melville’s seemingly *recherché* works. As Michael Paul Rogin puts it, “Melville’s revolutionary, expansive fiction-writing project went smash in the course of *Pierre*. His tales register thereafter the claustrophobic gloom and the portents of explosion which infiltrate the politics of the decade.” Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983). Here, I am concerned less with the political than the cultural and institutional forces registered by Melville in *The Confidence-Man*, but I am indebted to Rogin’s account. Michael Davitt Bell argues that Melville, like Hawthorne, “used the dissociated world of romance, its ‘world of words,’ to scrutinize the world of their contemporary American culture.” Both writers, in their fiction, “exploited the connection between questions of meaning in romance and questions of meaning in the world of which romance was not only a part but perhaps the most adequate emblem.” Bell, *The Development of American Romance* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981), 155.

Even as he attempts to find a posture capable of navigating the choppy waves of emerging vocations and disciplines, Melville stakes a claim for a certain kind of legitimacy as a literary artist, a species of success and prestige at odds with the popularity of sentimental and psychological novels of the day. The book's difficulty – which is to say, its specifically literary quality – is a function of Melville's own intellectual specialization, his specific understanding of the function of art, and his attempt to legitimize and to fulfill that function. The artist's role, though, is characterized by evasiveness, indirection, and the ability to resist or defuse propositional logic. Like Flaubert, the great puncturer of bourgeois competency, Melville understands technical expertise and artistic production as twin – but irreconcilable – species of intellectual commodification. Where the technician races to capitalize on his domain by bolstering it with claims to scientific precision and objective, progressive potential (a boon for the customer!), the artist resists allowing the aesthetic work to become a saleable object; he encrusts his production with the very difficulty that short-circuits unselfconscious consumption.

Like the belletristic men of letters who preceded him, Flaubert was, or at least seemed, socially and politically disinterested; he aspired to occupy what Pierre Bourdieu calls a “*neutral place*... above the class struggles and material conflicts of the dominant class.”¹⁴⁴ He strove likewise to be independent from and unaffected by the pressures, demands, and even rewards of the literary marketplace, and he demanded that his literature be read without respect to his biography, a convention that has held strong on criticism until only lately. Each of these desires, to the degree it is satisfied, serves to

¹⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Invention of the Artist's Life.” *Yale French Studies* (1987): 75-103, p. 97.

heighten the fantasy of aesthetic autonomy, of “pure art.” In the Francophone and Francophile traditions, Flaubert – alongside Baudelaire, whose *Fleurs du Mal* was published in 1857, and who had translated Poe’s essays on aesthetic theory as early as 1852 – is poised on the threshold of literary modernity. Flaubert signals, for Roland Barthes, the twilight of the classical tradition.¹⁴⁵ Through his self-conscious literariness, Flaubert “finally established Literature as an object, through promoting literary labour to the status of a value; form became the end-product of craftsmanship, like a piece of pottery or a jewel” (4). The great novelist’s craftsmanship, in other words, helped legitimize both the commodity he produced and the vocation of his craft itself. Flaubert, in other words, did not lay the groundwork for just any old writer of novels for money. Built into his example is a species of “high” literariness, an element that confounds convention and inaugurates its own tradition. But it does so by attaining a special kind of authoritative heft that can only be understood with reference to writing as a kind of *labor* due recognition and remuneration.

Like Flaubert, Melville foregrounds his own resistance to being understood – his uninterpretability – because that resistance is the marker of his own artistic specialization. In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville both delivers his most sweeping and most scathing critique of intellectual specialization even as he offers his most difficult, most *specialized* work of Literature.

¹⁴⁵ “[W]e know that where writing is concerned classicism lasts until Flaubert.” Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968) p. 37.

Forensics: Inventing the Confidence Man

“A confidence man knows he’s lying; that limits his scope. But a successful shaman believes what he says – and belief is contagious; there is no limit to *his* scope.”

-Robert Heinlein, *Strangers in a Strange Land*

“A hustler has to get out of town as quick as he can. But a good con man? He doesn't have to leave until he wants to.”

-Diggstown (1992)

As increasingly autonomous disciplines adopted increasingly idiosyncratic vocabularies, they became increasingly difficult to understand, much less evaluate, from the external position of laypersons or professionals in other disciplines. The great threat posed by technocratic social organization is that the “expertise” on which it is grounded might be empty obscurantism, and the hierarchy it founds might be counterfeit, organized not on the honest, holistic evaluation of individual merit but on the mastery of some skill or dogma that might be worthless, if not pernicious. *The Confidence-Man* lays out a vivisected anatomy of the antebellum market and the atomized subjects who constitute, and are swallowed by, it. Rather than starting with an individual working towards social legitimacy – a theme Melville’s earlier novels shared with developing trends of social realism – the book begins with the social totality of midcentury America itself, and works backwards and downwards, to the amazingly multifarious splay of dubious postures and outright impostures that constitute that totality. In sum, the *Fidèle*’s passengers evince a “Tartar-like picturesqueness, a sort of pagan abandonment and assurance. Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-

skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide.”¹⁴⁶ The image of society as an undifferentiated current is attractive, but its emphasis on becoming evades the question of the individual’s vulnerability. The laissez-faire atmosphere of confluence and intercourse leaves self-defense to selves.

Melville’s concealment of inwardness under layers of artifice, disciplined mannerism, and (im)posture dramatizes the experience of the market revolution on the ground, wherein habitual suspicion – so necessary in a society of strangers – could easily become a paralyzing paranoia. *Moby-Dick*, *Redburn*, and *White Jacket* illustrate a tight-knit community of expert sailors with delegated responsibilities, under the thrall of tyrannical oversight and the threat of draconian punishment. *The Confidence-Man*’s milieu, on the other hand, is a vacuum of authority and responsibility. It is a resolutely *urban* novel, depicting a floating city of dangerous strangers. On the *Fidèle*, as in the city, mystery is “raised to the level of spectacle,” as Alan Trachtenberg writes, and “the daily performances of city life” seem “parades of obscurity, of enigma, of silent sphinxes challenging the puzzles citizens.”¹⁴⁷ The book dramatizes that form of “modernity” Sacvan Bercovitch describes as “a world where the self was cut loose in a marketplace of other independent selves; where no theory of government could offer a ready way to impose community.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade: An Authoritative Text, Contemporary Reviews, Biographical Overviews, Sources, Backgrounds, and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 17. Further citations will be given in the text as CM.

¹⁴⁷ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 104.

¹⁴⁸ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 40.

For all its cosmopolitanism, community is just what the *Fidèle* lacks. Its deck is a honeycomb attracting a continually shifting, never quite self-identical, swarm of strangers, all “involuntarily submitting to that natural law which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member” (CM, 16). Here, that is, the surface tension lending consistency to the liberal subject bursts in the “helter-skelter” flow; the tide might be “cosmopolitan and confident,” but it seems that its subjects and citizens have grounds for concern over the matter of their own survival, much less protection. The riverboat’s passengers are confined, thrust together in a frontier facsimile of the public sphere. For the most part, they are alone; few have friends, colleagues, or families, and fewer still have brought them aboard. *The Confidence-Man* locks its characters (and its reader) away from any and all institutions – police, officials, even the ship’s crew – that might protect the individual from the impersonal forces of capital and the personal encroachment of soliciting entrepreneurs.

Thomas Bender has called Melville’s historical moment “the Age of Barnum,” a period marked by “an intellectual free-for-all, as all manner of men sought an audience in the city’s public culture.” Bender vividly describes the predicament:

Lacking a solid impersonal basis for establishing a relationship with their audience, urban intellectuals relied on their personalities and the appearance of intimate disclosure to establish the trust and authority essential for intellectual community. But personality was a poor substitute for the shared intellectual framework and clear social categories that had earlier given shape to local intellectual life. In such a situation, the eighteenth-century penchant for argument gave way to the quest for ‘influence.’¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), 88-89, 12.

Awash in the democratic spirit of exposure, people felt newly empowered to solve problems for themselves by exposing the submerged connections of a world that seemed endlessly interconnected. At midcentury, knowledge was, or seemed to be, socialized, redistributed to the people as a natural consequence of America's democratic principles. Jacksonian populism and Barnumesque skepticism created a climate of suspicion of and hostile towards the elitist implications of vocational expertise, especially as it became increasingly clear that professions stood transparently in conflict with the economic interests of their clients. Professionals, everyone noticed, are useful only when laypersons are faced with crises that outstrip their resources; so, P.T. Barnum quipped, "the learned professions depend solely for support upon the misfortunes, miseries, or foibles of mankind."¹⁵⁰

Indeed, institutionally legitimate professionals were often less effectual than their upstart competitors: "the expert turned out frequently to be a pedantic ignoramus, easily fooled himself; the learned doctor was often a victim of scientific nonsense and deserved to be overruled by intelligent laymen."¹⁵¹ Esotericism, in that case, could only be an obscurantist cover-up, a needless complexification of problems that could be solved by common sense. This mistrust of differential access, both to information and to the ability to use that information, implied that each individual was her own best judge; unless it was transparent and legible to the layperson, the consensual and conventional wisdom of professionals – whether clergymen, lawyers, or doctors – was practically irrelevant.

¹⁵⁰ P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 2000) 371.

¹⁵¹ Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) 74.

The problem with this brand of epistemological populism was that special skills, and the dedicated education to teach them, were necessary in order for anyone to do anything – particularly any *complex* thing – other than what anyone else could do. For anti-institutional thinkers like Thoreau (and sometimes Emerson), this was not a problem but a virtue of self-reliance. But as scientific paradigms, technological developments, communication media, and modes of transportation grew denser and more forbidding, expertise was again a commodity.¹⁵² All manner of men stepped up to fill this void of good advice. Some of these seekers were sincere philanthropists and lovers of knowledge, but with them swarmed a horde of charlatans and false prophets. It was not always possible to tell the difference; in some cases there did not seem to be a difference. There was no longer a reliable system for distinguishing legitimate experts from pretenders (or incompetents). In Wood's terms, the "democratization of truth" was coextensive with an "epistemological crisis": "Most ordinary people were no longer willing to defer to the knowledge and judgments of those who had once been their superiors." This requisitioning of personal agency carried responsibility along with it. If no one knew better than anyone else, that also meant every individual fell with full force on the sword of his mistakes. Without expert advisors, those overconfident in their ability to decide for themselves were easy "prey for all the hoaxers, confidence men, and tricksters like Edgar Allan Poe and P.T. Barnum who soon popped up everywhere."¹⁵³

¹⁵² Under sway of this populist enthusiasm, the professions in many ways undercut their own authority in order to rebuild it on new grounds: "released from direct English oversight, American jurists and legislators" mixed legal precedent, political philosophy, classical rhetoric, and "their own seat-of-the-pants sense of what was fair and equitable." John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 24.

¹⁵³ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1992), 362.

The confidence man's historical emergence, then, is part of the broader trend of the fetishization, commodification, and intense suspicion of expertise. The term "confidence man" was introduced in the press in 1849 to describe Thomas Wilson, who stole pocket watches from well-heeled gentlemen simply by asking to borrow them. The forensic category he inspired was an uneasy attempt to synthesize a complex web of social forces, in sometimes-contradictory ways. The figure's conceptual crystallization was the product of the mid-nineteenth century's mania for isolating and cataloguing perceived threats, most famously analyzed by Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Like the homosexual or the pervert, once he was fixed and taxonomized, the confidence man became an identifiable subspecies, a criminal underclass that could be understood by experts, discovered by forensics, and punished by law. The confidence man is, in a sense, in the closet: by passing for honest, he poses a threat that is more dangerous for its surreptitiousness.¹⁵⁴

Wilson's career, like Bartleby's, ended in the Tombs. Basically a petty crook, Wilson nevertheless captured the attention and imagination of the commentariat, particularly in New York, where artists, journalists, and editors saw him as a symptom of a society that was sickening, in one sense or another. A month after Wilson's arrest, the *Literary World* – Melville benefactor Evert Duyckinck's magazine – ran a piece on "The Confidence Man, the new species of Jeremy Diddler recently a subject of police fingering."¹⁵⁵ Its author argued, "It is a good thing, and speaks well for human nature,

¹⁵⁴ Closetedness, Eve Sedgwick argues, "is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it." Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Penguin, 1994), 3.

¹⁵⁵ *Literary World*, V (August 18, 1849), 133.

that, at this late day, in spite of all the hardening of civilization, and all the warning of newspapers, men *can be swindled*.” The man who is “*always* on his guard, *always* proof against appeal... is far gone, in our opinion, toward being himself a hardened villain... and when he dies, may Heaven have that confidence in him which he had not in his fellow mortals” (CM, 311). Here, Wilson serves as a kind of satanic tester, who gives ordinary people the opportunity to prove their goodness, even if that goodness is naïve.¹⁵⁶

Not everyone, though, was reassured by what Wilson said about the culture that fostered him. An anonymous writer for the New York *Herald* argued that there is no substantive difference between petty swindling and financial speculation; the speculative financier is merely the “Confidence Man on a large scale.” Where the solitary operator’s “genius has been employed on a small scale in Broadway,” the genius of banks and bankers “has been employed in Wall street [sic]. That’s all the difference. He has obtained half a dozen watches. They have pocketed millions of dollars. He is a swindler. They are exemplars of honesty. He is a rogue. They are financiers” (CM, 308). The editorial ends with a perverse sort of toast: “Long life to the real ‘Confidence Man!’ – the ‘Confidence Man’ of Wall street... As for the ‘Confidence Man’ of the Tombs,’ he is a cheat, a humbug, a delusion, a sham, a mockery! Let him rot!” (CM, 309). Unlike

¹⁵⁶ In other forms, this diagnostic analysis of the confidence man as a theoretically unfortunate, but practically irreducible member in the cabinet of American democracy would lead to the formulation of the “professional criminal.” This element would reach a kind of diagnostic apotheosis in David Maurer’s *The Big Con*. Maurer argues, “Professional crime is in reality nothing more than a great variety of highly specialized trades” (280). That is, the confidence man’s “methods differ more in degree than in kind from those employed by more legitimate forms of business” (3). This creates an interesting gray area. If con men “are not ‘crooks’ in the ordinary sense of the word,” it stands to reason that the “more legitimate forms of business” that share their methods are not precisely the *opposite* of crooks. Maurer claims, “Before 1900 crime had not become a big business. Confidence men did not realize that they were destined to become the aristocrats of crime. They had not visualized a smoothly working machine, its political cogs well greased with bribe-money and its essential parts composed of slick, expert professionals” (10). Maurer, *The Big Con: The Classic Story of the Confidence Man and the Confidence Trick* (London: Century, 1999 [1940]).

Wilson, the banks do nothing illegal; and unlike Wilson, they don't get caught.¹⁵⁷ In either case, though, the weapons of fraud and finance are the same: the ability to cultivate consent in the skeptical, and suasion, whether moral or not.

These editorial responses reflect the ambivalence this figure engendered in the commentariat, and in each case, the writer takes the confidence man to be a symptom of a broader social phenomenon. The first editorial uses the confidence man to celebrate the Christian charitableness of American character and American democracy, despite the obstacles presented to brotherly democracy by greed and crime; this optimistic/progressive view places him in the taxonomy of criminals and deviants, those misfits who are essentially *other than* the "typical," good-natured individual.¹⁵⁸ This forensic impulse is comforting, insofar as it implies that confidence men can be mastered, outmaneuvered, and policed. On the other hand, it induces anxiety, since it demands the kind of constant vigilance that can verge into paranoia. If anyone could be a confidence man, everyone might be a confidence man, and it is up to each individual not to be taken in, duped, or tricked. The second editorial uses the confidence man as leverage to indict the excesses and systemic corruption of American capital in the early days of the robber barons; this pessimistic/skeptical view sees all men as, at least potentially, members of the same fallen species. Some urban intellectuals, like the *Herald* writer, felt that the

¹⁵⁷ The mordant irony of this critique of capital is rounded by the gentler treatment of the small-scale confidence man, a kind of "financial genius," whose "powers of moral suasion" are nearly a match for those of "Father Matthew himself" (CM, 306). This equation puts Theobald Matthew, Irish priest and founder of the temperance movement's Total Abstinence Society, in uncomfortable proximity with street graft.

¹⁵⁸ So, "In contemporary descriptions the antebellum city was presented as the natural habitat of hypocrisy and deceit, 'the theater of humbugs,'" and there was a tremendous growth in the market for "sensationalist exposés that purported to rip the mask of hypocrisy from the face of the depraved city itself," as Karen Halttunen puts it (*Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1982], 37).

machine of capital was itself all but indistinguishable from a confidence game, a worry that would only intensify with the omnipresent political and economic corruption that marked the Gilded Age.

Worse, these writers worried that the system's "aristocrats" were not, strictly speaking, criminals; they were instead reformers, financiers, peddlers, partisans, and grandstanders. All were in the business of selling themselves, and of advocating their own interests, and all took pains to look altruistic and disinterested.¹⁵⁹ When a confidence trick becomes legible *as* a confidence trick, something has gone wrong: the obvious hustler's mistake is not victimizing his victims, but allowing his victims to *realize* that they have been victimized. The best con men go undiscovered, and earn the faith of an unsuspecting community for however long they want it. The goal of *refined* con men is to transubstantiate illegitimacy into legitimacy, so that they might be recognized as an institutional rather than a criminal element. If they seem antiestablishmentarian, it is only to clear space for themselves at the establishment's table. Lacking what Magali Larson calls "socially recognized expertise," any specialist was *prima facie* indistinguishable from a charlatan.¹⁶⁰ The antebellum impulse to form associations and societies was an unambiguous attempt to overcome this obstacle.

¹⁵⁹ William Worthington Fowler's contemporary description of Wall Street both resembles *The Confidence-Man*'s exotic, if debauched, menagerie, and illustrates what many saw as the essential false dichotomy between capitalists and confidence men: "All classes and grades are represented here – rich and poor, gentle and simple, learned and illiterate... The broken operator takes whiskey 'straight' with the wealthy capitalist, and the puritan and blackleg exchange a sympathetic smile when they see the stocks advancing in which they are interested." Quoted in H.W. Brand, *American Colossus: The Triumph of Capitalism, 1865-1900* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010), 16.

¹⁶⁰ Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: Monopolies of Competence and Sheltered Markets* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013 [1977]). Larson argues, the "task of professional organizers was twofold: to open the ranks of traditional professional elites by direct or indirect attack upon their gatekeeping institutions; and to organize the expanded markets opened by urbanization and by the relative enrichment of certain publics" (Rise, 10).

The characters conventionally labeled confidence men by *The Confidence-Man*'s criticism attempt to fill the antebellum era's void of institutional legitimacy by offering other characters investment opportunities (that may or may not be legitimate, and are hence highly speculative). Each claims his own proprietary economy of faith, based on the promise of future fulfillment rather than immediate gratification. In aggregate, they cover the explosion of specialized speculative economies that subtended the market revolution: charity, religion, medicine, labor, and finance. As it unfurls, *The Confidence-Man* offers a procession of targeted marketers who employ increasingly sophisticated techniques to disable suspicion in their potential customers. These ostensibly conning characters present themselves as experts whose authority is founded on special knowledge of "nature" or "reality." They claim a special ability to see the truth of nature or reality, and then to offer that ability for sale.

However, these claims to knowledge indelicately balance the progressive claims of science with the authority of special revelation. Ambitious to quicken reform "with the Wall street spirit," the Seminole charity agent's pet project is a World's Charity whose "one object" is "the methodization of the world's benevolence" (CM, 49, 47). The president and transfer agent of the Black Rapids Coal Company holds that dour topics should only be "philosophized upon, as not to afford handles to those unblessed with the true light," so as to keep rhetorical ammunition out of the hands of those cynical folk who might adversely affect the stock market. The herb doctor castigates science as passing fad; herbalists, he says, "go about in nature, humbly seeking her cures," unlike those hubristic researchers who see themselves as discoverers. The Philosophical Intelligence Officer bases his business on "strictly philosophical principles," culled from "a careful

analytical study of man,” and so can deliver maximally efficient (and therefore maximally exploitable) laborers

The real skill of these characters, though, lies less in methodization than in finding likely customers, which is to say, promising to satisfy deep-seated desires, or threatening the realization of deep-seated fears. Proto-professions, in the middle of the nineteenth century, were speculative ventures (gambles): potential but certainly not guaranteed vehicles of legitimacy for their pioneering practitioners and developers, who, it never stops being surprising to reflect, were improvising. In a spiritedly anti-professional account of nineteenth century professionalization, Burton J. Bledstein describes professionals as fear-mongers and predators.

Professionals not only lived in an irrational world, they cultivated that irrationality by uncovering abnormality and perversity everywhere: in diseased bodies, criminal minds, political conspiracies, threats to the national security. An irrational world, an amoral one in a state of constant crisis, made the professional person who possessed his special knowledge indispensable to the victimized client, who was reduced to a condition of desperate trust. The culture of professionalism exploited the weaknesses of Americans – their fears of violent, sudden, catastrophic, and meaningless forces that erupted unpredictably in both individual and mass behavior.¹⁶¹

By this account, professionals’ primary agent of persuasion is fear, and their primary products are prevention and cure. They flourish in an atmosphere of paranoia, and that atmosphere flourishes with them.

In his dealings with a consumptive, the herb doctor – himself shilling an alternative therapy – is locked in rhetorical battle with other alternative therapies; indeed, his central sales strategy is to persuade the miser that other treatments are, despite the best intentions of their sellers, harmful and illegitimate. He paints mineral doctors, “not

¹⁶¹ Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976), 102.

as willful wrongdoers, but good Samaritans erring” (CM, 82). The water-cure, likewise, is a “fatal delusion of the well-meaning Preisnitz,” its inventor (CM, 85). In contrast, herb doctors, “claim nothing, invent nothing,” but merely “go about in nature, humbly seeking her cures” (CM, 84). Unlike those who promise miracle cures, the herb doctor is “neither prophet nor charlatan” (CM, 88). He mocks the “conceit – that science is now-a-days so expert that, in consumptive cases... it can, by prescription of the inhalation of certain vapors, achieve the sublimest act of omnipotence, breathing into all but lifeless dust the breath of life” (CM, 84). Scientific doctors are hubristic, even “atheistical,” evincing that “pride in human skill, which seems scarce compatible with reverential dependence upon the power above” (CM, 84).

Against the astringent snake oils of artifice and science, the herb doctor reasons, “nature is health; for health is good, and nature cannot work ill. As little can she work error. Get thee nature, and you get well. Now, I repeat, this medicine is nature’s own” (CM, 87). Daniel Walker Howe reflects the conventional historical view of the period in claiming that medicine was “possibly the least well developed” of the “major branches of science,” which fostered the proliferation of alternative therapies and fringe treatments: “Though unorthodox practitioners could be unscrupulous charlatans, some of them had sounder ideas and did less harm than the M.D.s.”¹⁶² Of course, the herb doctor is the agent of nature, and in preaching submission to its curative powers, he also preaches unconditional submission to his own expertise, for an indefinite duration: he advises the sick man that if he takes “my medicine steadily, without assigning an especial day, near

¹⁶² David Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), p. 470.

or remote, to discontinue it, then you may calmly look for some eventual result of good” (CM, 88). The sick man, then, is the herb doctor’s customer unto death.

But even in Melville’s bleak anatomy, confidence men are not a necessarily destructive or parasitic force: preying on emotion is not necessarily diabolical, nor is taking advantage necessarily a zero-sum game. Though these are surely aspects of capital’s exploitative nature, exploitation is not without pleasures and payoffs, however attenuated.¹⁶³ Curiously, as Lawrence Buell observes, the book offers “no tangible proof of actual cheating, not even in the case of the herb-doctor” (Buell, 16). The B.R.C.C. president is selling either worthless or legitimately tantalizing stock, but in either case he is selling financial speculation (and with it, the promise of profit to the daring, like the collegian, and future security to the cautious, like the merchant, Henry Roberts). The herb doctor is selling either a miracle cure or medicinally worthless snake oil – or if you prefer, a placebo – but in either case, he is marketing the promise of health to persons sick or in pain (and so, if his cures don’t work, exploiting their fear-fostered credulity).¹⁶⁴ The Philosophical Intelligence Officer is contracting labor to employers, but more importantly, he is selling the promise that ideal laborers can be bought (though they may never be delivered). Their putative products may be dubious, or even nonexistent, but we

¹⁶³ Capitalism, Michele Foucault suggests, “doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no”; it also “traverses and produces things, it induces pleasures, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression” (Truth and Power 1).

¹⁶⁴ Rachel Cole usefully views the book’s titular figure in terms of structural function rather than intent or personality. If “confidence-man has an identity,” she writes, “it is defined by winning, rather than deception... To be an embodiment of this character... is not to be just a player but the winner of a confidence game” (388). The confidence man, in short, “never loses.” The problem is that winning and losing, in *The Confidence-Man*, are no more self-evident than honesty and dishonesty. Instead, I see the novel’s confidence men as those characters who *try to win* assent through the promise of moral or monetary incentives; they need not even actually achieve it. Cole, “At the Limits of Identity: Realism and American Personhood in Melville’s *Confidence-Man*,” *Novel: a Forum on Fiction*. 39.3 (2006): 384-401.

have no grounds on which to judge them as individual characters or transactions. We do not know if the victims have been tricked or duped – that is to say, if they are in fact victims of anything more egregious than buyer's remorse. In other words, there may not be a single confidence man in *The Confidence-Man*.

For all that, though, the threat of deception and ruination looms everywhere. In *The Confidence-Man*'s telling, capitalism is always susceptible to abuse, and so, in the capitalist context, suspicion is never entirely unwarranted. On the other hand, suspicion, when generalized into a habitual posture, leads to misery, terror, and a strange kind of resentful smugness (as in the gimlet-eyed man or Pitch, the Missouri bachelor). The characters in *The Confidence-Man*, then, are self-elected specialists of dubious standing who want, or *seem* to want, to be recognized as socially legitimate. Part of the reason the book's self-professed specialists seem so dubious is that they exist in isolation; they *refer* to affiliates, but they never appear *with* those affiliates, or display any verifiable endorsement from any socially recognized association. In *The Confidence-Man*, as David Reynolds argues, "Melville had reached the same conclusion about American society that many humorists of the 1850s had: in the Barnumesque carnival of popular culture, all is reduced to theater and entrepreneurial manipulation."¹⁶⁵ Perhaps because of this omnipresence of manipulation, *The Confidence-Man* has suspiciously little to say about what constitutes confidence men, and is conspicuously unhelpful in identifying them, or differentiating them from anyone else.

¹⁶⁵ David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988) p. 552.

There is, on the *Fidèle*'s deck, a "placard nigh the captain's office, offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East; quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear, though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given; but what purported to be a careful description of his person followed" (CM, 9-10). The placard doubles as a kind of advertisement: "crowds" gather around it "[a]s if it had been a theatre-bill" (CM, 10). The book all but demands that we infer that this wanted poster is meant to warn passengers of the confidence man himself. Though the narrator emphasizes that the consistency or content of his "original genius" is obscure, he elides the fact that we readers can only guess at what his "vocation" comprises. After all, is imposture a job, or the mimicking of a job one doesn't have? The narrator assures us that the poster provides a "what purported to be a careful description of his person," but he does not transcribe that description; instead, he describes the description, if in an aggressively vague way. By withholding it from the reader, the novel ostensibly provides clues to its characters that it refuses its audience. If, however, the confidence man can look and act in the manner of a menagerie of different men, this information is worse than useless for those who have it. Indeed, if the confidence man is characterized by a chameleonic aptitude for disguise, the description can only divert attention and suspicion from his disguises.

So the placard offers a warning, and prescribes caution, but it gives no clues to identifying or defining the nature of the threat. In the midst of a description of the ship's carnival throng, the narrator observes that bandits and pirates, overt members of America's criminal class, have been "exterminated... for the most part, like the hunted generations of wolves in the same regions, leaving comparatively few successors; which

would seem cause for unalloyed gratulation, and is such to all except those who think that in new countries, where the wolves are killed off, the foxes increase” (CM, 10). Here, the narrator suggests, without affirming, that violent and overt criminality has been forced underground, as it were, in Young America. In this “new country,” criminals are no longer immediately recognizable in their otherness. This anxiety begets paranoia, fear that “foxes” walk among us undetected – not only the petty criminals and merchants who pepper the deck of the *Fidèle*, but also subtler predators whose otherness harrowingly disguised by familiarity. The wolf is what he is, but the fox is something other than what he seems to be.

The novel’s titular phrase appears only once, in the final chapter, when a “dreamy man” overhears the cosmopolitan’s reading aloud from the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, and calls out, “Who’s that describing the confidence-man?” (CM, 241). The description he keys on is this: “With much communication will he tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep” (CM, 241). The cosmopolitan understands this to mean that “not the truest friend in the world is to be implicitly trusted. Can Rochefoucault equal that? I should not wonder if his view of human nature, like Machiavelli’s, was taken from the Son of Sirach” (CM, 242). Frank Goodman takes the book’s author, in other words, to endorse a bleak view of human nature, one that forces individuals into positions of desperate suspicion at their constant vulnerability.

Interestingly, though, the cosmopolitan's quotation elides essential context: the Son of Sirach is, at this point, advising his reader against social climbing, against affiliating with the rich:

Burden not thyself above thy power while thou livest; and
have no fellowship with one that is mightier and richer than thyself: for
how agree the kettle and the earthen pot together? for if the one be
smitten against the other, it shall be broken.
The rich man hath done wrong, and yet he threateneth withal:
the poor is wronged, and he must intreat also.
If thou be for his profit, he will use thee: but if thou have
nothing, he will forsake thee.
If thou have any thing, he will live with thee: yea, he will
make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it.
If he have need of thee, he will deceive thee, and smile upon
thee, and put thee in hope; he will speak thee fair, and say, What
wantest thou?

The rich man, he says, is motivated by profit, and willing to exploit the poor man for his own benefit. Even when he “hath done wrong,” and has “wronged” the poor, he is in a position of power – “he threateneth withal,” and unjustly reduces the poor to the necessity of entreaty. Insofar as the poor have “fellowship” with the rich, they are susceptible to the volatile, and potentially catastrophic, whims of the market; so, the author advises, the poor should keep to themselves, for, “As the proud hate humility: so doth the rich abhor the poor.”

So what is, in Ecclesiasticus, a description of the rich and powerful man is presented, in *The Confidence-Man*, as a description of “the confidence-man.” The threat, then, is that the confidence man operates on the same motives ascribed to the rich man in Ecclesiasticus: profit, power, status, dominance, cruelty, self-righteousness, and an unfeeling willingness to exploit the other and the lesser.

Specialization in The Confidence-Man

“Some hypocrites are a great deal more confident than many saints.”
-Solomon Stoddard

“I'm not conceited, I'm just convinced. I'm so modest I can admit my own faults, and my only fault is, I don't realize how great I really am!”
-Muhammad Ali

It is not often noticed that the first half of *The Confidence-Man* actually dramatizes, in its deployment of characters, the evolution of occupational specialization. Though a full investigation of this is beyond my scope, here, a schematic list offers an intriguing alternative to reading the avatars of the confidence man as, for instance, so many disguises of the devil:

1. The man in cream, a renegade preacher, offers doctrine gratis to a flock he sees as lost, fallen
2. The Black Guinea sells entertainment and the opportunity to perform social superiority publically, through alms-giving
3. John Ringman sells equality and fraternity, by leveraging the pathos of social a peer in dire straits (there but for the grace of God)
4. The Seminole charity agent sells the exorcism of national guilt, or personal exculpation for social ills through the penance of charity
5. The Black Rapids Coal Company president sells financial speculation, the promise of personal enrichment
6. The herb doctor sells personal health, mastery over one's body
7. The Philosophical Intelligence Officer sells the subjugation of others in the form of perfectly routinized labor – a workforce with no unpredictable human element

None of these role-players, in 1856, was a professional in the conventional sense, but each offers a basically intellectual service to a community of laypersons helpless to perform that service for themselves. By the end of the century, fringe religions would be solidified into institutional structures; artists and singers would be established as professionals in their crafts; professional confidence men would be listed in police manuals; charity would be big business; Wall Street rivaled Washington as an epicenter of power; healthcare became the single most important market segment; and the acquisition and exploitation of labor became perhaps the dominant social problem.

It is fitting, then, that the first in the book's procession is a burlesque of one of the classical professions (with law and medicine): the clergy. *The Confidence-Man* begins

with the “advent” of a “lamb-like figure,” the man in cream, an ineffectual oracle with “the air of one neither courting nor shunning regard, but evenly pursuing the path of duty” (CM, 9). This duty, it seems, is to preach to the flock of *Fidèle* passengers; so, “gaining his place” at the head of the crowd, he holds up flash-sermons, scrawled on slate (“Charity thinketh no evil,” “Charity endureth all things”). But the annexation of “his place” proves fleeting, since the crowd perceives “no badge of authority about him, but rather something quite the contrary – he being of an aspect so singularly innocent; an aspect, too, which they took to be somehow inappropriate to the time and place, and inclining to the notion that his writing was of much the same sort” (CM, 11). The point, here, is that preacherly authority is predicated upon *badges*, outward signs, which connote that authority based on accepted custom. Later in the novel, for instance, a Methodist minister’s vocation will go unquestioned because of his white collar, even as he doubts the legitimacy of a black beggar’s blackness.

The man in cream is, “in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger.” Though the *Fidèle* is “always full of strangers,” with the man in cream’s disappearance, “she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange” (CM, 15). Though the passengers recognize the man in cream as a stranger, this only obscures the fact that they are strangers to one another. After being jeered, pushed, punched, and knocked over, he retreats from his abusers – “as if not wholly unaffected by his reception” – to a “retired spot on the forecastle” (CM, 13). Finally out of the public eye, and out of the public’s way, the narrator observes that, “as a deck-passenger, the stranger, simple though he seemed, was not entirely ignorant of *his place*” (CM, 13, my italics). This shift in the narrator’s identification of the man in cream’s “place” suggests

that he has been disciplined through punishment to identify himself as an exile in this “humble quarter.” He cannot earn social acceptance through sheer force of will, even when his message is drawn directly from scripture.

In his grab for public attention, the man in cream “had by no means passed unobserved, yet by stealing into retirement... he seemed to have courted oblivion, a boon not often withheld from so humble an applicant as he” (CM, 15). His vanishing, in fact, marks a beginning: “like some enchanted man in his grave, happily oblivious of all gossip, whether chiseled or chatted, the deaf and dumb stranger still tranquilly slept, *while now the boat started on her voyage*” (CM, 14, my italics). Finally, after “two or three random stoppages... the last transient memory of the slumberer vanished, and he himself, not unlikely, waked up and landed ere now” (CM, 15). And so the man in cream colors disappears from the novel, into narratorial speculation and reputational nonexistence – into the unconscious of the book and the world alike. The man in cream is the most obtrusive character for the book’s first two chapters, and he *seems* to transform into the character that follows him, the Black Guinea; but Will Kaufman proposes that “one reason for the critical disagreement” over the man in cream’s status as an avatar of the title character is that, as a confidence man, “he is a singular failure.”¹⁶⁶ He offers the timeless truths of scripture, but because he confers no impression of personal authority, the crowd rejects his message out of hand. Indeed, he fails as a preacher *because* he fails as a con man: he enjoins faith but receives none; he offers religious instruction, but provides no incentive for its adoption. Disembarrassed of his intrepid ambition for an audience, he seeks belonging in solitude and, eventually, oblivion.

¹⁶⁶ Will Kaufman. *The Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), p. 61.

After the man in cream, each focal character has something to sell. He is replaced, in the narrative's attention, by a busker – a “grotesque negro cripple” – who makes “music, such as it was,” with an “old coal-sifter of a tamborine.” In contrast to the seemingly innocent but socially intractable man in cream, the self-described “Black Guinea” does not challenge the crowd, or try to influence its beliefs or desires; instead, he attempts to read its beliefs and desires, and to alter his own behavior accordingly. (Perhaps because of this, Kaufman reflects the consensus that the Guinea is “unquestionably an avatar.”) This marginal minstrel's adaptability is underlined by the narrator's depiction of him in terms of a notoriously trainable, and stereotypically friendly, breed of dog: he is, “owing to something wrong about his legs... in effect, cut down to the stature of a Newfoundland dog; his knotted black fleece rubbing against the upper part of people's thighs as he made shift to shuffle about” (CM, 17). Due to his novel appearance, the Guinea is “not the least attractive object, for a time” (CM, 17). But the Guinea is able to inspire little generosity until he “more than revived their first interest” in him as a “curious object” by offering himself as the object of a “game of charity,” in which benefactors throw pennies (and buttons) into the Guinea's open mouth (CM, 18). With nothing to sell but hard luck and songs, the Guinea transforms himself into the site of recreation, for which the players must pay in order to participate. The game, “whether by chance or design, was a singular temptation at once to *diversion* and charity, though, even more than his crippled limbs, it put him on a canine footing. In short, as in his appearance he seemed a dog, so now, in a merry way, like a dog he began to be treated” (CM, 18).

At the height of the charity game, a “gimlet-eyed” man with a wooden leg declares the Guinea’s “deformity” to be “a sham, got up for financial purposes... He’s some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy” (CM, 19, 21). With this confrontation, writes Eric Lott, “we realize with a jolt that this is probably a blackface performance”; the scene’s dramatic irony consists in the fact that “Melville lifts the mask for the reader only,” and not for the *Fidèle*’s passengers (Lott, 61). As a literary critic writing a (brilliant) book on blackface minstrelsy, Lott has a vested interest in supposing that *The Confidence-Man* supports his view that the Guinea’s “‘secret emotions’ are probably those of a white man pretending to be black,” and that blackface “is just one more con game” (Lott, 62).¹⁶⁷ It is, though, by no means clear that the Guinea is “really” white. Our only reason to think so is the gimlet-eyed man’s misanthropic paranoia.

Susan M. Ryan argues that “the era’s voluminous writings on charity functioned most often as an anatomy of suspicion, promoting elaborate rituals of authentication and constructing the ideal donor as a rational, well-trained investigator.”¹⁶⁸ Further, Ryan writes,

The professional beggars whom these strategies were meant to circumvent engaged in a variety of passing. They faked destitution or illness, pretended to be blind, or borrowed hungry-looking children to make their appeals seem more urgent, all because they preferred such deceptions to working for a living, or so the story goes... From the donor’s perspective, then, the professionalization of beggars – a parody of Americans’ investment in occupational expertise – had to be matched by the professionalization of donors (692-93)

The gimlet-eyed man is ironized embodiment of this urge to forensic scrupulousness, but his motive may be, not benevolent watchdoggery, but resentment. The narrator surmises

¹⁶⁷ Though Lott is by no means alone in making this critical turn: “Guinea is in all probability a fake Negro impersonated by a ‘white operator’ (he may even be the devil himself)” (Cook, 35)

¹⁶⁸ Susan M. Ryan, “Misgivings: Melville, Race, and the Ambiguities of Benevolence.” *American Literary History*. 12.4 (2000): 685-712, p. 686.

that he “*may be* a discharged custom-house officer,” and that, having lost his job and income, he has “concluded to be avenged on government and humanity by making himself miserable for life, either by hating or suspecting everything and everybody” (CM, 21, my italics). The narrator, in other words, is – or represents himself to be – suspicious of the gimlet-eyed man’s suspicion, and the description he provides of the gimlet-eyed man’s attempt to prove the Guinea’s deceit is ridiculous indeed: In an attempt to “prove his [the Guinea’s] alleged imposture on the spot,” the “wooden-legged man hobbled up to the negro,” and would “have stripped him and then driven him away, but he was prevented by the crowd’s clamor” (CM, 20). This description, leading with its wooden leg, invites us to see Melville’s late Captain reflected in the gimlet-eyed man: The defiant Ahab – the tragic hero who threatened to punch through the prison-wall of reality to hurt God, to strike through the mask, to reach the truth – is reduced to forcibly removing the clothes of a black-looking man who he suspects to be white.

The literary critic, in attempting to prove imposture or treachery, is reduced to a similar position of punching through a veil that yields no substance; indeed, there are compelling reasons to read the Guinea as “actually” black. Aside from the crassly depicted physical likeness, the Guinea’s Newfoundland dog-ness is characterized not only by friendly forthrightness and eagerness to please, but also by submissiveness, or better, resignation to yield to the power of the (white) mob. Confronted with the gimlet-eyed man’s suspicion, the Guinea’s countenance “drooped into a heavy-hearted expression, full of the most painful distress. So far abased beneath its proper physical level, that Newfoundland-dog face turned in passively hopeless appeal, as if instinct told it that the right or the wrong might not have overmuch to do with whatever wayward

mood superior intelligences might yield to” (CM, 19). The Guinea’s reaction is not to attack his attacker, but rather to submit to the crowd’s verdict, whatever it might be, offering in his defense only this “passively hopeless appeal.”

It is useful to remember that, in consequence of the nation’s Fugitive Slave Acts (1793, 1850), those blacks suspected and accused of being fugitive slaves were legally forbidden from testifying in their own defense in trials held almost entirely before entirely white juries.¹⁶⁹ In describing the crowd – “suddenly come to be all justiciaries in the case themselves” – the narrator tells the story of an Arkansas lynch mob that breaks a condemned man out of prison, tries him again in an ad-hoc court, and, finding him “even guiltier than the court had done... forthwith proceeded to execution; so that the gallows presented the truly warning spectacle of a man hanged by his friends” (CM, 20). The same year blacks legally lost all standing as citizens, in the *Dred Scott vs. Sanford* case, Melville invokes racial violence, vigilante “justice,” and the volatility of mob psychology to color our understanding of the danger posed by an all-white, extralegal jury, and the fear this elicits in a solitary, accused black man.

Where the Guinea can only hope the white mob is a sympathetic one, a “soldier-like” Methodist minister, who initially defends the Guinea against the accusations, is under no such threat (CM, 22). Under the gimlet-eyed man’s needling, the minister speaks “with exterior calmness tremulous with inkept emotion... conscientiously holding back the old Adam in him, as if it were a mastiff he had by the neck” (CM, 22, 23). He finally loses control, “suddenly catching this exasperating opponent by his shabby coat-collar, and shaking him till his timber-toe clattered on the deck like a nine-pin” (CM, 23).

¹⁶⁹ See James Forman’s “Juries and Race in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Yale Law Journal*. 113.4 (2004): 895-938.

Unregenerate human nature (“old Adam”) is here described less as in terms of grace than of *manners*; the outburst is a failure of self-restraint and decorum. As Jenny Davidson points out, “Manners – the social constraints that check the dictates of individual desire – represent a subtle but pervasive hypocrisy, a form of discipline that exacts certain penalties but also promises social and moral rewards” (Davidson, 8). The minister’s social position allows him to break character, so to speak, when provoked, with no repercussions but the reproaches of his own conscience.

So, in this scene, the narrator confronts us with a series of suspicious behaviors, potential hypocrisies, and latent disjunctions between action and feeling. When, on the other hand, we read the characters as *equivalent to* the roles they play – when we take their self-representations for granted – we can read the novel as a poignant and devastating portrait of the “labor” of black beggars who lack even labor-power to sell. The Guinea is a freeman only because, as he says, “What ge’mman want to own dese here legs?” (CM, 18). But this “freedom” is purchased by an absolute dependence on the altruism of a culture deeply ungenerous to persons in his position. During the “game of charity,” it is irrelevant whether the Guinea is “really” black, or a white man in blackface; in either case, he provides the crowd with a service it wants, and is willing to pay for: the debasement of a man in need, under the guise of benevolence.¹⁷⁰ In this respect, the novel dramatizes Nietzsche’s assertions of the pernicious motives of charity:

¹⁷⁰ Suspicion that the Guinea is actually white, in other words, breaks up the crowd’s charitable enthusiasm; and while surely this is in part meant to suggest that the crowd is not well pleased by imposture, it also implies that they are not comfortable with dehumanizing a white man. Though we may not share in the enthusiasm with which the crowd objectifies and humiliates the man in cream and the Black Guinea, still we join them in the aesthetic appreciation of the scene, as mediated to us by the narrator’s endlessly-faceted, crystalline prose. We are removed from the immediacy of the spectacle, which allows us to enjoy it voyeuristically, without feeling guilt for our participation in the debasement. If we are horrified, that too can provide a species of satisfaction—we feel contempt for the crowd, even as we share their suspicion.

We benefit and show benevolence to those who are already dependent on us in some way (which means that they are used to thinking of us as causes); we want to increase their power because in that way we increase ours, or we want to show them how advantageous it is to be in our power – that way they will become more satisfied with their condition and more hostile to and willing to fight against the enemies of our power.¹⁷¹

In Melville's novel, minstrelsy is not quite – or not unambiguously – white labor's exploitation of blackness. The Guinea is an entertainer-cum-businessman whose blackness is the central aspect of his advertising. His labor, such as it is, involves occupying the debased position of a disabled, disenfranchised black man, and thereby reminding onlookers of their own social advantages, and allowing them to exercise their power over the subaltern supplicant.¹⁷²

So where the man in cream offers the crowd what he thinks it *ought to want*, the Guinea finds what the crowd wants and offers it to them. What they share, though, is a lack of authority: neither is able to demonstrate to the crowd that it has any good reason to believe him or reward him. John Ringman's signal development, in this procession, is his self-representation as a social equal. Like the Guinea, Ringman has nothing to sell but his own hard-luck story, but instead of allowing himself to be debased, he draws himself level with the social status of his auditors; instead of selling the opportunity to humiliate

¹⁷¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 86. Melville's treatment also reflects Oscar Wilde's assertion that "charity degrades and demoralizes... It is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property. It is both immoral and unfair." Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (Portland, Me: T.B. Mosher, 1905), p. 11.

¹⁷² While handing a half dollar to the Guinea, the merchant Henry Roberts drops his business card; at this, "shuffling a pace nigher, with one upstretched hand he [the Guinea] received the alms, as unconsciously, his one advanced leather stump covered the card" (CM, 25). The Guinea's "leather stump" might give us pause, here. If he is an avatar of the confidence man, the fact that he can remove his own legs suggests that his body is a sort of blank canvas that is not white by default, so to say he is in "blackface" is just as much of a misnomer as to say his other avatars are in "whiteface." If, on the other hand, he is merely a panhandler, he may be in blackface, but our suspicion is based on the most circumstantial of evidence.

him, Ringman tries to embarrass others into generosity. Of all the characters, Ringman is most like Thomas Wilson, the watch-thief, who wins confidence by sheer audacity, force of charisma, and the assertion of his own social worthiness. He positions himself as the social equal, even the colleague, of the merchant Henry Roberts: "I met you, now some six years back, at Brade Brothers & Co.'s office, I think. I was traveling for a Philadelphia house. The senior Brade introduced us, you remember; some business-chat followed, then you forced me home with you to a family tea, and a family time we had" (CM, 27). He is, essentially, a cold-reader, an ersatz psychic who guesses after the biography of his target until he hits on something close to the bone.

In offering a series of vague, widely applicable personal statements about Roberts, Ringman's acquisition of the merchant's confidence relies on the cold-reading technique twentieth century psychologists call the "Barnum effect," or in other words, "the fact that a cleverly worded 'personal' description based on general, stereotyped statements will be readily accepted as an accurate description by most people."¹⁷³

According to Denis Dutton,

while a Barnum description may gain in believability when it is thought to be derived from a "credible" source, such as a professional psychologist, it may have even more charm for a subject if it is thought to be derived from a mystical or "incredible" source, such as the lines on the palm of the hand, or the order of cards from a Tarot deck. Much depends here on the prior beliefs and predispositions the subject brings to his or her encounter with the description.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Jon E. Roedkelein *Dictionary of Theories, Laws, and Concepts in Psychology* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998) p. 67. The phrase was coined, following Donald G. Patterson's "personality description after the manner of P.T. Barnum," by Paul E. Meehl: "I suggest – and I am quite serious – that we adopt the phrase *Barnum effect* to stigmatize those pseudosuccessful clinical procedures in which personality descriptions from tests are made to fit the patient largely or wholly by virtue of their triviality; and in which any nontrivial, but perhaps erroneous, inferences are hidden in a context of assertions or denials which carry high confidence simply because of the population base rates, regardless of the test's validity." Meehl, "Wanted – a Good Cookbook," *American Psychologist*, 11.6 (Jun, 1956): 263-272

¹⁷⁴ Denis Dutton, "The Cold Reading Technique," *Experientia* 44 (1988): 326-32

Indeed, in this way, Ringman is able to overwhelm Roberts's defenses with a barrage of pseudoscience and dubious philosophy, which hang heavy with the authoritative weight of jargon. Roberts doesn't remember their acquaintance, Ringman says, because of the lingering effects of a "brain fever," which has made his memory untrustworthy: "You see, sir, the mind is ductile... but images, ductilely received into it, need a certain time to harden and bake in their impressions," lest a trauma or "casualty... will in an instant obliterate them, as though they had never been" (CM, 28). He convinces Roberts to doubt his own memories by offering an account of memory itself that seems authoritative. In Lockean terms, Roberts's memories have been "quite erased from the tablet" (CM, 28). Ringman jumbles together the authoritative languages of natural philosophy and obscurantist jargon in order to put Roberts in a position of dependence on his own expertise: "Now, those who have faithless memories, should they not have some little confidence in the less faithless memories of others?" (CM, 27).

The man in gray, a self-represented charity agent of the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum, is the first of *The Confidence-Man's* "avatars" to offer a service on behalf of a constituency, rather than for his own benefit. Though in some sense a supplicant, the man in gray does not beg for himself, but on behalf of less fortunate persons, which is reflected in the narrator's description of him: "Upon a cursory view," he "might have seemed, like the man with the weed, one of the less unrefined children of misfortune; but, on a closer observation, his countenance revealed little of sorrow, though much of sanctity" (CM, 37). "But recently founded," the Asylum he represents is ostensibly meant to provide for the relatives of those Seminoles who were casualties of the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). (The "asylum" provided to survivors by the

government was forced removal to a reservation in Oklahoma.) The man in gray, then, provides personal exculpation for the American oppression of “those cruelly-used Indians” (CM, 53). He offers not just the opportunity to benevolent giving, but the promise of publicity in reward: “Let me take down name and amount. We publish these names” (CM, 43).

So charity, in *The Confidence-Man*, is only partly an exercise in personal non-complicity or exculpation. John Truman – the transfer-agent and president of the Black Rapids Coal Company – tells the hapless collegian that he has just, “quite rudely,” declined the advances of John Ringman – the man with the weed; and, “not three minutes afterwards, I felt self-reproach, with a kind of prompting, very peremptory, to deliver over into that unfortunate man’s hands a ten dollar bill... Yes, it may be superstition, but I can’t help it; I have my weak side, thank God” (CM, 54). So the impulse to charity, in this case, is spurred by conscience, fostered by guilt. But Truman also speaks of charity as a voluntary tax to be paid when a surplus has been accumulated: he and his confreres in the coal concern “have been so very prosperous lately in our affairs... that really, out of my abundance, associative and individual, it is but fair that a charitable investment or two should be made” (CM, 54-55).

Similarly, the man in white – the Seminole charity agent’s principle interlocutor – is so rich that his generosity is recreational: for him, “charity was in one sense not an effort, but a luxury; against too great an indulgence in which his steward, a humorist, had sometimes admonished him” (CM, 46). The man in white’s black servant embodies and reflects the systemic corruption that enables and is engendered by differential resources. The narrator offers a striking meditation on the rich man’s hands:

if you watched them a while, you noticed that they avoided touching anything; you noticed, in short, that a certain negro body-servant, whose hands nature had dyed black, perhaps with the same purpose that millers wear white, this negro servant's hands did most of his master's handling for him; having to do with dirt on his account, but not to his prejudices. But if, with the same undefiledness of consequences to himself, a gentleman could also sin by deputy, how shocking would that be! But it is not permitted to be; and even if it were, no judicious moralist would make proclamation of it. (CM, 44)

While also warning him against giving overmuch, the servant does the man in white's literal dirty work, thus allowing him to keep his hands clean. The man in white, in short, illustrates the inadequacy of traditional ethics in a world of global capital. It would be "shocking" for a "gentleman" to "sin by deputy," but fortunately, it is impossible; and even if it *were* possible, it could only go unspoken. His moral spotlessness is all but literally purchased by his wealth, and Melville is here suggesting an intimate (if submerged) connection between moral authority, purchasing power, and institutional legitimacy.

A pressing ambiguity, here, is the man in white's status as a slave-holder, which we can only infer. The narrator dwells on his "goodness," which serves as an oblique euphemism for, or corollary of, his wealth: "Such goodness seemed his, allied with such fortune, that, so far as his own personal experience could have gone, scarcely could he have known ill, physical or moral" (CM, 43). As opposed to "righteous" men like William Wilberforce – leader of the charge to abolish the slave trade in Britain – the narrator says, the man in white is merely good ("that superior merit, probably, was not his" [CM, 44]). The man in white's goodness is figured as a kind of innocence born of obliviousness; he is not even aware of moral evil, "by observation or philosophy," let alone capable of its commission: "for that, probably, his nature, by its opposition, imperfectly qualified, or from it wholly exempted him" (CM, 43-44). He is too wealthy

to do or to know wrong, but his goodness is, to the narrator, ironized in such a way that it becomes suspicious, if not outright deplorable: “it is to be hoped that his goodness will not at least be considered criminal in him. At all events, no man, not even a righteous man, would think it quite right to commit this gentleman to prison for the crime, extraordinary as he might deem it” (CM, 45). It is legal to own slaves, in other words, and therefore unpunishable; his goodness is criminality stripped of its legal content.

The man in white’s moral oblivion corresponds to his juridical innocence. He is good because he commits no crime, but he is not righteous because he lacks the conscience and consciousness to acknowledge that what he does is wrong. So the man in white is a member of America’s bourgeoisie, the finance aristocracy. He is, in other words, a kind of proto-robber baron, accumulating by exploitation only to give (a small sliver) back by what seems like unconditioned generosity.¹⁷⁵ In appealing to the man in white’s obvious concern for profit, the man in gray describes himself as “no Fourier, the projector of an impossible scheme, but *a philanthropist and a financier*, setting forth a philanthropy and a finance which are practicable” (CM, 48, my italics). That is, he combines pure altruism and businesslike efficiency into an attractive (and impossible) package.

Civic discourse in Melville’s day was characterized by an optimism that was sincere as it was bombastic: the belief that self-improvement and general reform were compatible, even mutually necessary, ideals. As Wendy Gamber puts it, “almost all

¹⁷⁵ Slavoj Žižek sees the legacy of the robber barons in liberal communists, those big business philanthropists, who are “true citizens of the world. They are good people who worry... They see the ‘deeper causes’ of today’s problems... So their goal is not to earn money, but to change the world, though if this makes them more money as a by-product, who’s to complain!” Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 20.

antebellum reformers... believed that it was possible not only to change the world, but to perfect it.”¹⁷⁶ This overwhelming ambition led to a near-unbearable tension between “optimism and anxiety, self-determination and coercion” (134). Since the world was perfectible, it stood to reason that it was the burden and responsibility of its inhabitants to perfect it; and the persons most adequate to the task would be those experts versed in the problems faced by a postlapsarian society.

Irony, on the other hand, is not exactly the antithesis of expertise, but it does evade the logic of expertise, which develops through the accrual of knowledge into doctrine and routine into program. Scott Carpenter offers a useful account of irony’s relationship – though not quite its equivalence – with trickery:

In traditional rhetoric, the figure most closely associated with fraudulence is, of course, *irony*. As an *unmarked figure* (that is, a rhetorical device that has no distinguishing syntax or other markers), irony is indistinguishable from its opposite at the same time that it bears a different value – just as the best counterfeit coin will be opposite to but indistinguishable from its legitimate counterpart, so, the ironic utterance may be the exact replica of its ‘sincere’ or ‘literal’ twin, differentiated only by the most intangible of mirages: intent.¹⁷⁷

Artistic ambiguity – which is to say, irony employed for aesthetic ends – offered a kind of non-programmatic, or perhaps Socratic, form of expertise to those coterie writers and intellectuals who rejected the anti-individual imperatives professional writing as a craft like any other, a depthless and automated skill like screwing screws or nailing nails. This coterie was quintessentially transnational in scope, and offers a rationale for the French

¹⁷⁶ Wendy Gamber, “Antebellum Reform: Salvation, Self-Control, and Social Transformation,” in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*, ed. Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 129–33, p. 129.

¹⁷⁷ Scott Carpenter, *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France: Frauds, Hoaxes, and Counterfeits* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009) p. 153–54.

Symbolists' repurposing of Edgar Allan Poe's aesthetic theory – predicated on gaps and lurches rather than evidentiary logic – as a species of ironically anti-dogmatic dogma.

Since Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, critics have noticed a certain similarity between American antebellum writing and the more sophisticated-seeming French symbolism that largely obviated it as the central site of literary modernity. According to Edmund Wilson, "by the middle of the century, the Romantic writers in the United States – Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, even Emerson – were, for reasons which would be interesting to determine, developing in the direction of symbolism."¹⁷⁸ Still, even though "Poe's critical writings provided the first scriptures of the Symbolist Movement," it remains the case that "[t]he Symbolist Movement proper was first largely confined to France and principally limited to poetry of rather an esoteric kind" (12, 22). Though he took pains to apologize for their relative backwardness – they "wrote no masterpieces" – Charles Feidelson followed Wilson in delegating the writers of the "American Renaissance" as proto-symbolists: "Considered as pure romantics, they are minor disciples of European masters. Their symbolistic method is their title to literary independence... [A]s symbolists they look forward to one of the most sophisticated movements in literary history; however inexpert, they broaden the possibilities of literature."¹⁷⁹

The transnational turn in American studies might also offer a compelling rationale to contest these genetic narratives of literary influence. In the 1850s – whether or not in

¹⁷⁸ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (London: Penguin, 1993) p. 12.

¹⁷⁹ Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1953) p. 4.

the wake of a specifically French 1848 – literary artists on both continents struggled to establish a vocational, writerly specialty that would foreground the labor of writing, which was always exemplified by the mastery of tropes (which is to say, the ironic and multifarious bending and splaying of overt meaning) in fiction, poetry, and even discursive prose. Melville and Flaubert were locked, then, in a mutual struggle with the phenomenon best diagnosed by their Atlantic contemporary, Karl Marx, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). The ascendance of the moneyed bourgeoisie – and the failure of their revolutionary program – signaled, for Marx, the end of “the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and... left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’” In universalizing capitalism, the bourgeoisie “has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.”¹⁸⁰ With this came the nineteenth century’s intensification of the division of labor, in which “the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine.” All wage laborers, “who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market” (479). Ultimately, the “*alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its

¹⁸⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 475.

own confronting him.” In this, Melville and Flaubert exemplify the struggle that Western intellectuals – from Theodor Adorno and Edward Said to Richard Rorty and Bruce Robbins – have waged, ironically, from *within* the ostensibly legitimate, putatively professional space of the academy: the struggle to be an expert in multiplicity, endless complexity, and the variegated splay of the totality of nothing short of existence itself, without the responsibility of aiding industrial production, or of morally edifying or spiritually fortifying the layperson. They strive to codify a type of labor that would be fully unalienable, like the rights of democracy, while being endowed with the air of aristocratic prestige. No one would complain if they didn’t also want to be paid for it.

CHAPTER THREE

“ARM OF THE LORD, AWAKE!”:

DEMOCRACY AND CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY IN MARTIN DELANY’S

BLAKE

“The individual leader or leadership group who might lead the Negro Revolution into a phase of mass insurrection is not yet discernible. Such a person would have to combine charisma with organizational ability. Had he lived, Malcolm X might have been the type of leader who, with his lieutenants, would have been the nucleus for the building of a revolutionary army.”

-Killian

“I do not pretend to be a divine man, but I do believe in divine guidance, divine power, and in the fulfillment of divine prophecy. I am not educated, nor am I an expert in any particular field – but I am sincere, and my sincerity is my credentials.”

-Malcolm X

In recent years, Martin Delany’s *Blake* has become a minor *cause célèbre* among literary scholars of a transnational bent. In his foundational study, *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy posits *Blake* as an antidote to a perniciously conservative strain of black nationalism. The novel imagines a community organized on the principle of “black solidarity,” Gilroy writes, that is “explicitly anti-ethnic and opposes narrow African-American exceptionalism in the name of a truly pan-African, diaspora sensibility.”¹⁸¹ In Gilroy’s analysis, Delany’s novel moves us beyond race and nation, which, it recognizes, are not adequate frameworks for political theory, action, or organization. In *Blake*, blackness is “a matter of politics rather than a common cultural condition.”¹⁸² This new

¹⁸¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 27.

¹⁸² Ibid.

basis for blackness, which emphasizes struggle rather than some shared past or bloodline, furnishes a new form of group identity: a transnational, ethnically non-essential black community that finds a “deeper unity” in its “common orientation to the future.”

A mounting body of criticism – one that rejects, or reconceives the sufficiency of, narrowly national and/or racial frames of reference – testifies to timeliness and success of Gilroy’s challenge to absolutism and essentialism. Following Gilroy’s lead, for instance, Gregg Crane argues that Blake’s Cuban community is a “pluralistic coalition of maroon and free blacks of various shades, classes, and national and ethnic origins.”¹⁸³ In this account, Delany’s novel stages a search for a new form of corporate citizenship; Blake’s community, then, knocks the autonomous individual from its perch atop political discourse, positing instead “the pluralistic group as the central possessor of rights.” As in Gilroy, the emergent principle of solidarity Crane traces is at once oppositional and egalitarian:

In contrast to the ‘white’ definition of the American ‘political community’ through reference to the *past* ‘custom and policy of country’ and a national interest in racial dominion, parallel ‘black’ conversations in *Blake* develop an African American alternative – creating a pluralistic community and determining individual rights through a *present* dialogue that discovers and establishes a civic consensus.¹⁸⁴

By this account, Delany’s novel denigrates the political value of liberal-bourgeois individualism and ethnicity-based solidarity alike, elevating in their stead a collective mood of utopian futurity based on shared political interests, and set against common

¹⁸³ Gregg Crane, “The Lexicon of Rights, Power, and Community in *Blake*: Martin R. Delany’s Dissent from *Dred Scott*,” *American Literature* 68.3 (1996): 527-53, 530. Crane reads *Blake* as a response to Justice Taney’s *Dred Scott* decision, which rescinded any and all forms of citizenship from black Americans, since, Taney reasoned, they possessed “no rights which the white man was bound to respect” (quoted in Crane, 529).

¹⁸⁴ Crane, 540.

enemies. “By focusing on the pluralistic group as the central possessor of rights,” Crane claims, Delany thus “fuses Anglo-American natural rights rhetoric and an African emphasis on community.”¹⁸⁵

Gilroy and Crane are surely right to emphasize those aspects of *Blake* that resist, undermine, or delegitimize established forms of authority – particularly those institutions and traditions that uphold the ideological constellation of slavery, prejudice, segregation, and oppression. The legitimacy of plantation slavery depended on a vast body of constitutional rationalizations and juridical precedents, a long history of patriarchal social organization, and an unfortunately robust tradition of racist philosophy, all of which Delany opposed in no uncertain terms. Blake’s community is defined by what it is not, and by what it opposes.¹⁸⁶

In balancing inclusivity and exclusivity as organizing principles, this community is not altogether different from any other; as A.P. Cohen argues, the term “seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a *relational* idea: the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities.”¹⁸⁷ Such readings do not so much overstate the novel’s progressive or emancipatory commitments as they

¹⁸⁵ Crane, 531.

¹⁸⁶ “Community” – usually inflected in a utopian and/or transnational sense – has become perhaps the central term of analysis in contemporary *Blake* scholarship. According to Leslie W. Lewis, “the community constructed by the sharing of Blake’s secret is defined by their African diasporic, or... their nonwhite identities, rather than their slave status.” Lewis, *Telling Narratives: Secrets in African American Literature* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 2007), 57-8. In *Liberation Historiography*, John Ernest offers an accessible gloss of his argument, in *Resistance and Reformation*, that the novel form enabled Delany to “imagine a community not yet realized, and in that way formulate an ideological map of destiny, gathering together a fragmented community under the banner of revolutionary resistance to the mechanisms and assumptions of a white supremacist culture.” Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2004), 131.

¹⁸⁷ Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1993), 12.

underestimate its engagement with, and investment in, potentially authoritarian modes of political arrangement and social influence, and the status differences buried under the sheen of solidarity. I want to resist what I see as the tendency to insulate *Blake* from aspects of Delany's thought – elitism, parochialism, obfuscation – that are less amenable to the approbation of critical radicalism in its prevailing modes. I emphatically do not mean to suggest that *Blake* is somehow fundamentally reactionary or crypto-conservative; like its author, the novel dissolves Manichean political poles (as if they were stable to begin with).

Though these critics are well aware of Delany's ambivalent and ambiguous politics – in Gilroy's words, "Delany is a figure of extraordinary complexity whose political trajectory... dissolves any simple attempts to fix him as consistently either conservative or radical" (BA, 20) – their analyses largely ignore the possibility that Delany's *novel* is characterized by a similarly akimbo political posture. *Blake* is instead taken to embody an ideological coherence over and above its author's notorious intellectual volatility. Solidarity is not, of course, an absolute or monolithic concept. Indeed, some affective links conceal or justify more fundamental imbalances in power, prestige, or privilege. That the book is discussed in terms of "community" rather than "black nationalism" is, in part, an attempt to sheer away the enormous weight of history. It is can also, though, be read as a recuperative gesture, since, as Raymond Williams notes, "community" is "unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society, etc*)" in that "it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any

positive opposing or distinguishing term.”¹⁸⁸ Though the discourse of black nationalism is backgrounded in these discussions, one of that discourse’s potentially problematic assumptions is preserved. As Wahneema Lubiano has shown, black nationalism’s “strategies for ‘liberation’ in the U.S. context have cohered around the ‘fact’ that within the discourse of white supremacy, all blacks are equally debased, and that for the most part class has not mediated any of the effects of racism. Black nationalism is predicated on the notion of racial solidarity across class lines.”¹⁸⁹

In this chapter, then, I argue that *Blake* reimagines civic affiliation and political authority in predominantly *charismatic* terms. That Blake’s community exists at all is a testament to his personal magnetism – his ability to draw others into, and arrange them within, a constellation around him. The novel is most compelling, as I see it, precisely in its fraught efforts to imagine a pluralistic community balanced precariously atop an inner circle of elect (and eventually, elected) elites. The community is held together, as Gilroy demonstrates, by its members’ shared resistance to the hegemonic values of white supremacy, and by their corresponding rejection of the institutional and intellectual legitimacy annexed by the beneficiaries of Atlantic slavery. More interesting, for my purposes, is the complex fantasy of election that serves as the community’s vertical axis. Exclusivity in this sense does not simply separate those on the inside from undesirable others; In *Blake*’s nominally pluralistic community, that is, the many are managed and instructed by a few, and those few are managed and instructed by Henry Blake. Over the

¹⁸⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1985 [1976]), 76.

¹⁸⁹ Wahneema Lubiano, "Standing in for the State: Black Nationalism and 'Writing' the Black Subject," in *Is It Nation Time* ed. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2002), 159.

course of the novel, the nature of Blake's organization – and hence, of his community – shifts from an essentially evangelical model (Blake as itinerant minister) in the first half, to an essentially administrative model (Blake as ranking official) in the second. *Blake* dramatizes the new and shifting positions of social privilege produced by the charismatic leader's emergence, the consolidation of his doctrine, and the conglomeration of his followers.

A Halo of Feelings and Dreams

Blake's plot verges between pleasantly weird flights of fancy, patently absurd coincidences, and grotesque portrayals of humanity's capacity for cruelty, oppression, and debasement – to say nothing of its abiding tone of perseverant endurance.

Generically, the book's first half is a kind of pseudo-apocalyptic picaresque: Galvanized by the sale and removal of his wife, Maggie, a slave named Henry Holland – née Carolus Blacus, alias Henry Blake – concocts a "plan" for the liberation of all New World slaves. After arranging for the escape and safe passage of his son to Canada, and escaping himself, Blake proselytizes his way through the American South, cultivating a vast and shadowy syndicate of coconspirators. Then, with no discernable proximate cause, Blake abandons this established organization, and the spatial confines of the American South itself, to embark instead on a mission to rescue his wife from the Cuban plantation that holds her, and simultaneously to create a new organization of Caribbean free blacks and slaves.

In each of its two halves, *Blake's* plot – and Blake's plot along with it – turns on his "secret organization," which ostensibly aims to liberate slaves, to elevate all blacks, and to raze the foundations of New World slavery. Beyond these rather limited

parameters, little can be affirmed or alleged about the secret without resorting to assumption or speculation. As several critics have suggested, Blake's secret remains a secret, and, as with *Pulp Fiction*'s iconic briefcase, the obscurity of its contents constitutes the novel's abiding interpretive problem.¹⁹⁰ Because its concluding chapters have never been recovered, we have no way of knowing whether Delany's novel ends with a triumphal, bloodless revolution; with a brutal massacre of slave-owners at great cost to the revolutionaries; with some gradual progress made through level-headed reform and tenacious diplomacy; or, just as plausibly, with disappointment and political paralysis.

Henry Blake is a "uniquely heroic and intelligent character," writes Robert Levine, whose "potential to bring about 'the redemption of his race' is clear from the opening chapters of the novel, as Delany emphasizes just how different he is from other slaves."¹⁹¹ It is, though, deceptively difficult to identify the substance of this difference. The air of mystery is further complicated by a roiling constellation of half-defined, mysteriously co-implicated terms that seem to designate tactics subordinated to Blake's broader strategy: Blake speaks of "designs," "schemes," "secretions," "plans," "projects," "measures," "intelligence," "communication," and so forth. In light its generally credited

¹⁹⁰ Several critics have hazarded guesses. As Robert S. Levine observes, "Though he never reveals his 'secret,' his war song suggests the nature of the plot: 'Insurrection shall be my theme! / ... One simultaneous war cry / Shall burst upon the midnight air!' At an agreed upon time and date, the slaves shall rise in unison and kill the masters." Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1997), 193. Stephen Knadler offers the intriguing claim that "the secret is for the black citizen subject of the colored republic to compete in the empire of capital... While the council in Cuba of colored leaders might rebel against white hegemony, they cannot – and do not – rebel against the impersonal forces of an emergent liberal capitalist economy." Knadler, *Remapping Citizenship and the Nation in African-American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 56.

¹⁹¹ Levine, *Representative Identity*, 193.

obscurity – the air of secrecy enveloping the secret itself – it is somewhat surprising to discover that we *do*, in fact, learn the secret; or, at any rate, the narrative permits us to overhear a statement that Blake *calls* “the secret.” In his first gathering with Charles and Andy, his first followers, Blake declares, “I now impart to you the secret, it is this: I have laid a scheme, and matured a plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery!”¹⁹² Taken as the definition of a concept (“the term ‘secret’ entails the predicates...”)¹⁹³ this is heady, but forbiddingly vague, stuff; as a strategy, it is empty of tactics – a goal without a program. We’re not sure what Blake means by “insurrection” or “overthrow” – both strongly connote, but do not necessarily mandate, overt violence – nor can we be sure whether the “plan” is a tautological restatement of the “scheme,” or an entirely discrete phase of the campaign as a whole.¹⁹³ If, on the other hand, we suspend our disbelief – if we accept the declaration on its own terms, and trust that it accurately reflects *Blake’s* fictional reality – the statement starts to look like a performance of prophecy. Blake makes a truth claim about the future based, not on evidence or probability, but on a mystical insight into providential design. Blake’s success is assured, in this case, and only awaits its inevitable culmination.

When Charles questions the prospects of a vast secret society geared towards synchronized insurrection, in light of “the present ignorant state of our people in the slave States,” Blake’s response is as unspecific as it is startlingly evocative:

This difficulty is obviated. It is so simple that the most stupid among the slaves will understand it as well as if he had been instructed for a year... So simple is it that the trees of the forest or an orchard illustrate

¹⁹² Martin R. Delany, *Blake: Or, the Huts of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 39. Further citations will be given parenthetically as B.

¹⁹³ The latter ambiguity does not seem to be the product of simple compositional sloppiness, since it recurs, and is compounded, in the novel’s second half: after rescuing his wife from slavery, Henry “detail[s] to her his plans and schemes; and the next day imparted his grand design upon Cuba” (B, 191).

it; flocks of birds or domestic cattle, fields of corn, hemp, or sugar cane; tobacco, rice, or cotton, the whistling of the wind, rustling of the leaves, flashing of lightning, roaring of thunder, and running of streams all keep it constantly before their eyes and in their memory, so they can't forget it if they would. (B, 39)

As Blake tells it, the secret seems obvious to the point of self-evidence; every sign in the book of nature becomes a cryptogram, and all share the same solution. The whole world of creation becomes a vast web of hieroglyphics, and every individual sign conveys an identical meaning: *the secret*. Deeming themselves “fools... that we didn't know it long ago,” Charles and Andy marvel at the plan's intuitive simplicity. Charles comes to see the secret as a manifestation of divine presence: “Surely God must be in the work” (B, 40).

Crucially, Blake's message is reproducible and transmissible; simply *learning* the secret serves as a qualification to *teach* it to others. Before leaving Mississippi, Blake recruits his two friends as intellectual ambassadors – evangelists whose mission is to spread the scheme as if it were the gospel – and offers one last directive:

You must now go on and organize continually. It makes no difference when, nor where you are, so that the slaves are true and trustworthy, as the scheme is adapted to all times and places... All you have to do, is to find one good man or woman – I don't care which, so that they prove to be the right person – on a single plantation, and hold a seclusion and impart the secret to them, and make them the organizers for their own plantation, and they in like manner impart it to some other next to them, and so on. In this way it will spread like smallpox among them. (B, 41)

An individual's acceptance of the plan and willingness to join, or to start a new franchise of, the organization takes the form of infection – or, perhaps, of religious conversion. If the plan is *caught* (like smallpox), it is neither *learned* nor *chosen*. Its transmission is not subject to the rules of rational discourse and argument. Blake does not persuade his auditors – he enchants them.

So, I argue, Blake's capacity to disseminate his program, and thereby win converts, transcends the limitations, and evades the parameters, of everyday discourse;

we might describe it as a species of charismatic communication. In a nuanced analysis of charisma as a social force, Eva Horn argues that charismatic authority is inescapably dependant on “techniques of self-promotion and self-stylization... Like a theatrical role, charisma has to be ‘performed’: it has to be displayed before an audience as a specific and remarkable way to speak, gesture, and communicate. Thus it intrinsically has an *aesthetic side*: charisma is born with the *representation* of an individual as extraordinary and ‘gifted.’”¹⁹⁴ By itself, the performance is insufficient; an audience must credit the performance, and affectively invest in the performer in order to complete the charismatic circuit. In recognizing charisma, the audience both creates and legitimates the charismatic leader. In this sense, charisma is “a quality that lies in the ability to capture the imagination of a community and focus its hopes, affects, and dreams on the charismatic figure” – and, in so doing, to secure “a bond of enchantment” among the members of that community.¹⁹⁵ Charisma is, then, less a predicate of character than an intersubjective effect – an affective and affiliative bond radiating throughout the charismatic community. It is, in other words, less something an individual *possesses* than something that *happens*.

In Max Weber's seminal theory, charisma is “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”¹⁹⁶ At its most mundane – as a “certain quality” that leads to its possessor being

¹⁹⁴ Eva Horn, “Introduction,” *New German Critique*, special issue, *Narrating Charisma* 114 (2011), 10.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 241. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text as ES. The gendered pronoun is neither an accident nor a mere instance of dated grammar; the concept has a deep-set masculinist bias, as

treated as “specifically exceptional” – charisma might manifest itself in any number of affective impressions: trustworthiness, warmth, generosity, gravitas, humor, and so forth. In the more rarefied sense that attracts Weber, the concept encompasses those “sacred values that have been most cherished, the ecstatic and visionary capacities of shamans, sorcerers, ascetics, and pneumatics of all sorts” (ES, 246). The charmed novitiate recognizes his or her charismatic hero “as the innerly ‘called’ leader of men. Men do not obey him by virtue of tradition or statute, but because they believe in him.”¹⁹⁷ Charisma’s “‘objective’ law emanates concretely from the highly personal experience of heavenly grace and from the god-like strength of the hero,” who “seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission” (ES, 246).

Charisma wobbles the boundary between secular distinction and religious election, since “it is the *duty* of those to whom he addresses his mission to recognize him as their charismatically qualified leader... If they recognize him, he is their master” (ES, 247, 246). But this mastery is precarious, since its “only basis of legitimacy,” and the sole function capable of sustaining it, is “personal charisma so long as it is proved; that is, as long as it receives recognition” (ES, 244). The would-be leader’s “charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent” (ES, 246). Public crisis is especially conducive to the formation of charismatic affiliations in underprivileged, oppressed, or exploited groups that receive little physical comfort or spiritual sustenance from their experience of mundane reality: “The sense of dignity of

Eva Horn notes in a useful introduction. She writes, “Ideally, the modern leader is a man (rarely a woman) ‘of the people,’ thus originating nowhere. By virtue of extraordinary talents, lucky coincidences, and personal ambition, he obtains social respectability and compliance from his followers” (Horn, 4).

¹⁹⁷ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. Hans H. Gerth, and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) p. 246.

the negatively privileged strata naturally refers to a future lying beyond the present, whether it is of this world or another,” writes Weber, and this hardscrabble optimism “must be nurtured by the belief in a providential ‘mission’ and by a belief in a specific honor before God” (ES, 190). This messianic or providential rhetoric is more than a mere metaphor; according to Weber, “The specific form of charismatic adjudication is prophetic revelation” (ES, 1115). As a genuinely political force, charisma is intimately connected to the founding moments and founding figures of new religious and (often utopian) political movements.

In one sense, then, charismatic communities are democratizing, in that they provide solidarity, shared principles, and a common orientation. In another sense, though, they are elitist, exclusive, and inescapably hierarchical, since they are centered on some heroic figure of special merit, who delegates to and confides in a trusted, inner circle. As “a figure of social integration and unity,” writes Horn, the charismatic leader functions like a king, with the crucial difference that the former upholds “the modern ideal of the people as sovereign... [T]he leader is part of the people and thus a figuration of the people as ultimate political actor, but spotlighted by a halo of feelings and dreams.”¹⁹⁸ Henry Blake is just such a figuration, and just such a figurehead. The important thing about the secret is not what it contains, but the effect it has – the intimacy it engenders, and the recognition it provokes.

Initiation into the organization, then, is less a matter of accumulated knowledge than a change in the style of thought. Glenn Hendler usefully redirects our attention from the contents of the plan, which are “quite mysterious,” to the form of its transmission:

¹⁹⁸ Horn, 9.

The novel, he argues, “emphasize[s] the act of counterpublic communication over its content... [T]he point of the group seems to consist mainly in a communicative exchange that constitutes and reproduces both a political counterpublic and a racialized revolutionary identity, rather than any particular political action.”¹⁹⁹ The group’s communicative interchanges “may be epistemologically empty, but they are affectively full.”²⁰⁰ It may be, though, that Blake’s communiqués are not so much epistemologically empty as epistemologically askew; they may or may not contain some elemental propositional content – we haven’t the evidence to know for sure. What seems clear is that the emotional impact of such messages, when they are received, is in excess of what we expect from persuasion brought about by rational discussion.

Even if his lesson is easy to learn, and the education is more emotional than intellectual, it still must be taught. Blake’s proselytizing mission aims to give the people – his people, *black* people – what they want, but only by awakening in them desires they did not know they had. Figured in the novel as the power to elicit belief – belief in himself, belief in his plan – Blake’s communicative power allows him to overcome differences in education, intelligence, and situation. But Blake commands recognition only and exactly to the extent that he receives recognition. As such, the novel routinely stages, for its readers, scenes of recognition. Even if Blake routinely denies his own specialness, other characters – his friends and followers, and even his avowed enemies – are eager to nominate and venerate him. So, upon hearing the plan for the first time, Andy admiringly observes that Blake “is fit fah leadah,” though Blake is hesitant to

¹⁹⁹ Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2001), 79.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

accept the mantle: “I greatly mistrust myself, brethren, but if I can’t command, I can at least plan” (B, 41). Andy dismisses the gesture of humility, even as he subordinates himself to Blake’s command: “I calls ‘im boss, ‘case ‘e ain’t nothing else but ‘boss”” (B, 41).

Those slaves ready to receive his message, and to enter into his “errand,” greet Blake as something between a prophet and a messiah, even if they have never met, or even heard, of him. In Texas, Blake encounters a family that, the narrator tells us, “enter[s] at once into the soul of his mission, seeming to have anticipated it” (B, 84). The paterfamilias, Sampson, “believing much in the Providence of God,” says he has “recently had it ‘shown to’ him – meaning a presentiment – that a messenger would come to him and reveal a plan of deliverance.” Having seemed to fulfill this augury, Blake leaves “the state of Texas to the consequences of a deep-laid scheme for a terrible insurrection” (B, 85). Arkansas’s slave communities are “pretty well organized already,” and have “a good general secret understanding among themselves,” even though they have never met, or even heard of, Blake. This ostensible preparedness and seeming autonomy, though, do not obviate their need for Blake, who they immediately recognize as their deliverer; as one slave tells him, “we long been waitin’ foh some sich like you to come ‘mong us. We thang God dis night in ouh soul! We long been lookin’ foh yeh, chile!” (B, 89).

In this – though in little else – the character he most resembles is Professor Moriarty, the sinister doppelganger and nemesis of Sherlock Holmes: “He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and nearly all that is undetected in this great city. He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker... He does

little himself. He only plans. But his agents are numerous and splendidly organized” (217). Blake too organizes a type of crime, with the obvious and essential difference that it is just and justified crime meant not to exploit an existing, stable order but to overturn an existing, unstable one. Since a good deal of *Blake*’s plot follows Blake as he “spread[s] his secret in front of us,” Leslie W. Lewis is surely right to claim that “the community comprised of those who know the secret, the in-group being constructed before our eyes, very definitely does not include us.”²⁰¹ This exclusivity – our exclusion from the in-group – is, as several critics have pointed out, a function of the secret’s impressive capacities as a tool for community building.²⁰²

The essentially emotional, non-symbolic nature of this communication is especially significant in that it enables a new kind of inclusivity for Blake’s counterpublic – his community. Belonging depends not on literacy, or on badges of distinction, but on a shared desire. As Nancy Fraser has argued, “discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere,” the official public of reading men and exclusive cliques, “was governed

²⁰¹ Lewis, *Telling Narratives*, 57.

²⁰² According to John Ernest, “what is finally most striking about the work is its air of mystery, of secrets suggested but untold, and of an organization powerful because it is, in fact, and will remain, a secret” (Ernest, 112). Ernest sees secrecy as such – the *form* of secrecy, rather than some specific content or message – as the book’s fundamental concern; Delany, he writes, “devoted the narrative above all to a determined mystery” (Ernest, 111). Similarly, Leslie W. Lewis writes, “the great secret of Delany’s novel is never explicitly told to his American readers, and it concerns African American and then Pan-African community rather than American identity... [T]he community comprised of those who know the secret, the in-group being constructed before our eyes, very definitely does not include us” (Lewis, 56-57). According to Rebecca Skidmore Biggio, “community-building secrecy is, in and of itself, the central and consistent insurrectionary message of the novel” (Biggio, 439). Biggio questions the ready association of Blake’s plan with the necessity of mass murder: “Blake’s mode of resistance,” she argues, “is the establishment and extension of an alternative community rather than an overt violent action” (Biggio, 451-52). It is “white fear of black conspiracy” that provides “the very basis on which the community is founded” (Biggio, 443). As she points out, “Blake’s survival depends on and his masculinity is defined by his ability to remain hidden and to conquer adversaries through mysterious skills that are never really explained” (Biggio, 448). Blake’s mastery of the mysterious secret, together with his “mysterious skills,” which verge on superpowers, are closely related to what I am calling his charismatic authority.

by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality,” and these protocols “functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers.”²⁰³ In contrast to this sanctioned form of engagement in the official public sphere – an imaginary convention of learned (mostly white) men (and fewer women), engaging one another as equals in learned prose – Blake insists that neither prior education nor native intelligence is a necessary prerequisite for its absorption. The organization is not a public of letters, but a public of voices, all of which flow from the tributary of Henry Blake’s mouth.

“A man of good literary attainments” though he may be, Blake is no writer (B, 17). Blake is a talker. This fact alone opens a chasm between *Blake*’s protagonist and its author. Delany received an intensive education in classics at a rare black-run free school at a time when less than two percent of the black population was formally schooled. Delany was, though, a harsh critic of classical education, which he found “only suited to the wealthy, or those who have a prospect of gaining a livelihood by it,” and an equally staunch advocate for vocational training: “Let us have an education, that shall practically develope [sic] our thinking faculties and manhood; and then, and not until then, shall we be able to vie with our oppressors (R, 212). Though his own career was in some respects a sustained and tragicomic succession of vocational near misses and disappointed ambitions, Delany managed to accrue a dazzling array of credentials; he made

²⁰³ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT UP): 109-42, 119.

noteworthy headway as a “journalist, editor, doctor, scientist, judge, soldier, inventor, customs inspector, orator, politician, and novelist” (BA, 19). He was not, and had no designs to be, an imaginative writer, by nearly any definition, for nearly the length of his career. When he wrote and spoke, he wrote and spoke as an intellectual – with a political agenda always in view, if obscure.²⁰⁴

He was especially dismissive of high-flown expression, which he saw as self-indulgence, or worse, as an evasion of the duty to struggle. He had no patience for the Romantic expression of private experience, nor for ineffable beauty, nor felicities of style, but rather thought of “literature” as an instrument – at times, a weapon: not an intrinsic good or autonomous aesthetic sphere, but a broad field of contestation encompassing journalism, criticism, political activism, and public debate. According to his critical calculus, “A practical precept of one sentence is worth a page of unintelligible jargon” (R, 99). This was the root of his relentless advocacy of practical, rather than classical, education. If, he reasoned, “a knowledge of all the various business enterprises, trades, professions, and sciences, is necessary for the elevation of the white, a knowledge of them also is necessary for the elevation of the colored man; and he cannot be elevated without them.” After all, it was solely by merit of “their literary attainments,” broadly construed, that white men had become “the contributors to, authors and teachers of, literature, science, religion, law, medicine, and all other useful attainments that the world now makes use of” (Con, 70).

²⁰⁴ According to Robert Levine, Delany “seems to have been unable to conceive of political action apart from writing” (DDPRI, 3). With genial hostility, Frederick Douglass alleged that Delany could not “speak or write without speaking and writing up the race to which he belongs” (quoted in Ullman, 248).

The fantasy informing *Blake* is the further reduction of prose, until “unintelligible jargon” is entirely supplanted by a singular “practical precept.” All laws can be traced back to this higher law, which can be grasped intuitively. The secret renders even basic literacy superfluous; all that is needed is “the right person.” Through this hierarchy-leveling, performative power of transparent speech – the ability to mediate meaning with no intermediary – Blake spreads both the secret and the discipline necessary to maintain the organizational structure needed to keep it from being prematurely set in motion.

For all its inclusivity, though, Blake’s plan is never entirely detached from Blake’s person. In the book’s more vatic moments, its hero comes to seem a vessel of divine vengeance, and a harbinger of the coming Armageddon: “From plantation to plantation did he go, sowing the seeds of future devastation and ruin to the master and redemption to the slave, an antecedent more terrible in its anticipation than the warning voice of the destroying Angel in commanding the slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt” (B, 83). Throughout his pilgrimage, Blake “scatter[s] to the winds and sow[s] the seeds of a future crop, only to take root in the thick black waters which cover it, to be grown in devastation, and reaped in a whirlwind of ruin” (B, 112). Some critics have concluded, from such portentous rhetoric, that the teleological motor driving the organization is, in fact, mass murder. According to Nell Painter, for instance, the reader looks on as Blake “painstakingly construct[s]... an underground government ready to take control of a black American nation – after Blake and his fellow revolutionaries have overthrown and killed all slaveholders” (Painter, 158).

In light of such interpretations, the most striking aspect of insurrectionary violence in *Blake* is its almost total absence from the plot. Though Blake is “compelled”

to travel from state to state as “a messenger of light and destruction,” the balefulness of the narrator’s rhetoric conceals the essentially pedagogical nature of Blake’s crusade:

Light, of necessity, had to be imparted to the darkened region of the obscure intellects of the slaves, to arouse them from their benighted condition to one of moral responsibility, to make them sensible that liberty was legitimately and essentially theirs, without which there was no distinction between them and the brute. Following as a necessary consequence would be the destruction of oppression and ignorance (B, 101).

Just as light displaces dark, in the narrator’s metaphysical commentary, so truth and virtue displace deception and depravity, and the world, duly enlightened, is rid of “oppression and ignorance.” Along with this heroic conception of Blake as a teacher-prophet comes a paternalistic and condescending conception of slaves, whose “obscure intellects” and “benighted condition” render them, by implication, morally *irresponsible*, and even subhuman. Slaves remain indistinct from brutes, that is, so long as the bringer of light, Henry Blake, has yet to visit them (or when they have refused to let him).

The most tantalizing – and so, perhaps, the most disappointing – of Blake’s secret convocations takes place in New Orleans: Blake is led into “one of the most secret and romantic-looking rooms,” where is convened “a party of fifteen, the representatives of the heads of that many plantations, who that night had gathered for the portentous purpose of a final decision on the hour to strike the first blow” (B, 102). The group accepts Henry at once, and shortly agrees on dubbing him “da King.” One woman praises God, she says, “Faw wat I feels an’ da knowledge I has receive dis night! I been all my days in darkness till now! I feels we shall be a people yit!” (B, 104). The group shares Blake’s revolutionary ideal, and is ready to come to a conclusive timeline for action. In Leslie W. Lewis’s useful formulation, “the communities formed in both part 1 and part 2 of the

novel can best be characterized as communities of believers.”²⁰⁵ What they believe in, most concretely, is Blake’s access to some higher plane on which the plan is fully formed, even if the world is not yet ready to be executed.

Again and again, though, interruption and deferral win out. The revolutionary party in New Orleans is crashed by an impatient drunkard named Tibs who, “bent on mischief,” asks, “what yeh all ‘cided on? I say dis night now au neveh!” (B, 104). Though Henry tries to reason with the rabble-rouser, and to explain that waiting is the only sensible plan at this point, he only succeeds in further enflaming Tibs’s mischievous ardor:

“My friend,” said Henry, “listen a moment to me. You are not yet ready for a strike; you are not yet ready to do anything effective. You have barely taken the first step in the matter, and — —”

“Strange!” interrupted the distracter. “Ah don’o yeh name, yeh strangeh to me — I see yeh talk ‘bout ‘step’; how many step man got to take fo’ ‘e kin walk? I likes to know dat! Tell me that fus, den yeh may ax me what yeh choose!”

“You must have all the necessary means, my brother,” persuasively resumed Henry, “for the accomplishment of your ends. Intelligence among yourself on everything pertaining to your designs and project. You must know what, how, and when to do. Have all the instrumentalities necessary for an effective effort, before making the attempt. Without this, you will fail, utterly fail!” (B, 105).

Though the other black Louisianans immediately see him as a leader and a mastermind, Tibs explicitly foregrounds his inability to recognize, and his unwillingness to cede authority to, Blake. The great planner is a stranger to Tibs; and Tibs, through his insistence on immediate and rash action, is “determined on distracting their plans” (B, 105). Finally, Tibs, “the betrayer,” takes to the streets by himself, brandishing “a formidable array of deathly weapons,” and yelling, “Insurrection! Insurrection! Death to every white!” (B, 106). The spectacle sets off a flurry of panic in white society — the army

²⁰⁵ Lewis, *Telling Narratives*, 63.

is called in, and something close to marshal law instituted. His hopes for organized activity and synchronized action dashed, Blake “admonishe[s]” his Louisianan colleagues, “as his parting counsel, to ‘stand still and see the salvation’” (B, 108). The message, in this case, is: don’t do nothing, but don’t do anything unauthorized, either; wait for the signal, for Blake knows best when the time has come.

The organization, then, is marked by a broad streak of paternalism. The plan is meant, first and foremost, to benefit slaves: to abrogate the material and administrative armature that props up the peculiar institution. Even if slaves have a crucial role to play in Blake’s plan, they are also treated as dangerously volatile, or as potential fifth columns eager to curry favor with white authorities. Due in no small part to this pedantic streak, Delany has long been accused of elitism – of sharing in the “authoritarian tendencies” of “the black leadership class,” which aspired, as Wilson J. Moses puts it, to “organic collectivism under authority.”²⁰⁶ According more than a few of his critics, Delany believed that the figure he cut, in person and in prose, could and should provide the pattern for all theretofore unenlightened blacks to follow, if only they cared enough (or were smart enough) to realize it. In a particularly vigorous critique, Nell Painter argues that Delany “never questioned his assumption that the most intelligent of the race – however defined – should decide what the masses should do, and he saw unquestioning acceptance of ‘intelligent’ leadership as the duty of the masses. As a prime example of colored intelligence, Delany saw his role as instructing the rest of the race.”²⁰⁷ Delany’s

²⁰⁶ Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1978), 22.

²⁰⁷ Nell Irvin Painter, “Martin R. Delany: Elitism and Black Nationalism,” in *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Leon F. Litwack and August Meier (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1988), 156.

was “an elitist, not a democratic, creed,” Painter argues, that aspired to mobilize “the masses” as “a mute, docile work force to be led by their betters – their *black* betters, but their betters nonetheless.”²⁰⁸

Religion and the Red River

Many recent critics have distanced *Blake* from – or at least, not emphasized its ideological reliance on – the rhetoric and logic of antebellum Protestant evangelicalism. One of Gilroy’s more provocative claims, for instance, relates to the status of religion in *Blake*: in its Cuban setting, he argues, the novel demonstrates that “Black survival depends on forging a new means to build alliances above and beyond petty issues like language, religion, skin colour, and to a lesser extent gender,” and that, because religion “marks... petty ethnic differences with special clarity, its overcoming signifies the utopian move beyond ethnicity and the establishment of a new basis for community, mutuality and reciprocity” (BA, 28-29). In the service of this utopian magnanimity and inclusiveness, Gilroy argues, Delany “used his hero Blake to convey criticisms of religion in general and Christianity in particular” (BA, 28). Delany imbues Blake with “skepticism and strictly instrumental orientation towards religion, which he saw as a valuable tool for the political project he sought to advance” (BA, 28). Gilroy celebrates

²⁰⁸ Painter, 170. Similarly, Tunde Adeleke writes, Delany “emphasized intelligence as the key to black progress” and “upheld the necessity of the intelligentsia constituting the vanguard of the black struggle,” though ultimately “his elevation of intelligence smacked of a condescending and negative perception of the masses” (Black Bio, 260). In fact, Delany did not just position himself above “the masses”; he also “distinguished himself as the elite of the black leadership elite.” “Black Biography in the Service of a Revolution: Martin R. Delany in Afro-American Historiography,” *Biography* 17.3 (1994): 248-267, 260. Elsewhere Adeleke writes, Delany “assumed, with missionary zeal, the responsibility of assisting other African Americans to achieve self-emancipatory consciousness—the prerequisite for ultimate freedom.” “Martin R. Delany’s Philosophy of Education: a Neglected Aspect of African American Liberation Thought.” *Journal of Negro Education*. 63.2 (1994): 221-36, 223.

Blake's "refus[al] to 'stand still and see salvation' wherever it was offered to him: by the rituals of the white church on the plantation, in the Catholic church or in the superstitions of the conjures" (BA, 28).

Certainly Blake's is an "instrumental orientation towards religion," but it is worth considering whether it is a *strictly* instrumental orientation – or whether it is any more instrumental than any other orientation towards religion. Gilroy is surely right insofar as the phrase "religion in general and Christianity in particular" designates, in *Blake*, a set of oppressive institutions and superstitious folk practices; and Blake's religious rhetoric can indeed seem like ornamental embellishment of an essentially secular message: "I am not fit," he declares at one point, "for a spiritual leader; my warfare is not Heavenly, but earthly; I have not to do with angels, but with men; not with righteousness, but wickedness... If I ever were a Christian, slavery has made me a sinner; if I had been an angel, it would have made me a devil! I feel more like cursing than praying – may God forgive me!" (B, 103). Blake's emphasis, here, is clearly on the this-worldly field of political struggle.

Early in the novel, Blake justifies his repudiation of "standing still" on the grounds that "that part was intended for the Jews, a people long since dead. I'll obey that intended for me" (B, 21). Blake invokes instead a contradictory injunction from the New Testament: "'Now is the accepted time, today is the day of salvation.' So you see, Daddy Joe, this is very different to standing still" (B, 21). Despite this seeming emphasis on immediate action, Blake does not hesitate to enjoin his followers to do just what he will not – to stand still. Indeed, it becomes something of a slogan for the organization.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ As Levine observes, it is Blake's "visionary insight into (not a rejection of) a scriptural phrase ["Stand still and see the salvation"] that provides him with the germ of his insurrectionary plot" (DDPRI, 194).

Early in his pilgrimage, Henry encounters “old man Nathan,” who he deems “all that could be desired, and equal to the task of propagating the scheme.” Having heard Blake out, Nathan feels, for the first time, “an implied meaning, in the promise of the Lord”:

“Now Laud!” with uplifted hand exclaimed he at the conclusion of the interview. “My eyes has seen, and meh yeahs heahn, an’ now Laud! I’s willing’ to stan’ still an’ see dy salvation!” (B, 73).

Nathan’s patience, his willingness to wait for deliverance, is justified by the this-worldly endgame of Blake’s scheme, in which “salvation” becomes something that will arrive *before* death, and is therefore something that must be earned. In this sense, it is crucially distinct from the slave’s understanding of the phrase, by which heavenly rewards are offered after death for quietism and toleration of white dominance during life.

Blake’s appropriation of the scriptural saying is a subversive and ironic act of cultural appropriation, but for this it is by no means unproblematic. He is willing to use the expression he condemns, and to let his followers apply it to their own situations, as a kind of argument from authority – *you must do this because it must be done*. His “advent” – taken literally, the first coming of the savior – in Nashville, Delany writes, “was like the application of fire to a drought-seasoned stubble field. The harvest was ripe and ready for the scythe, long before the reaper and time for gathering came. In both town and country the disappointment was sad, when told by Henry that the time to strike had not yet come; that they for the present must ‘Stand still and see the salvation!’” When one of the gathered rebels, “blinded by tears,” wants to know “how long we gots to wait dis way,” Blake can only plead ignorance and advise submission to providence:

“I can’t tell you how long, father; God knows best.”
“An’ how we gwine know w’en ‘e is ready?”
“When we are ready, He is ready, and not till then is His time.”

The divine sign that the “harvest” is ready to be gathered, in other words, is nothing more or less than the completion of the organization. Blake does not claim to know when this will be; only when it will look like when it arrives.

In a fascinating account of intellectual modernization, Zygmunt Bauman observes that, where intellectuals and *philosophes* were concerned, “Priests, of course, stood for the spiritual hierarchy of the Church – a direct rival in the struggle for intellectual domination, an alternative intellectual elite to be disempowered and displaced.”²¹⁰ Rather than seeing the novel as somehow against religion, it is useful to think of the “organization” as an emerging institution that is *in competition with* the church – a new player in the same market, for obedient believers. When Charles and Andy want to know more than Blake wants to reveal, he warns, “The plans are mine and you must allow me to know more about them than you. Just here, for once, the slave-holding preacher’s advice to the black man is appropriate, ‘Stand still and see the salvation’” (B, 38). As we have seen, this advice is appropriate much more often than “Just here,” but the advice is written in a different code – it is made to something new.

The novel’s orientation towards religion, in other words, is pragmatic and instrumentalist, but this is not the same as saying that the novel is *against* “religion in general and Christianity in particular,” or that it narrates religion’s “overcoming” and replacement by something better. The distinction between politics and religion is anything but absolute in Delany’s novel; Robert Levine well captures the thorny tangle of pragmatism and prophecy in his description of Henry Blake’s “messianic, Moses-like

²¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Intellectuals* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell UP, 1987), 71.

ability to get blacks ‘intelligently united’ against their oppressors.”²¹¹ *Blake* is both religious and not – heretical without being atheistic.²¹² Even when he has first learned of Maggie’s deportation, and rejected the tenets and rituals of the black church, Blake affirms, “I do trust the Lord as much as ever, but I now understand him better than I use to, that’s all. I don’t intend to be made a fool of any longer by false preaching” (B, 20). He intends, instead, to make others wise by true preaching – to make a movement of true believers.

Blake’s first excursion after his escape from the Franks plantation – south to Louisiana, through “Red River country” – is punctuated by his only act of lethal resistance to white tyranny. On the road, Blake

met with no obstruction except in one instance, when he left his assailant quietly upon the earth. A few days after an inquest was held upon the body of a deceased overseer – verdict of the Jury, ‘By hands unknown.’

On approaching the river, after crossing a number of streams... he was brought to sad reflections. A dread came over him, difficulties lay before him, dangers stood staring him in the face at every step he took. Here for the first time since his maturity of manhood responsibilities rose up in a shape of which he had no conception. A mighty undertaking, such as had never before been ventured upon, and the duty devolving upon him, was too much for a slave with no other aid than the aspirations of his soul panting for liberty (B, 68-69).

²¹¹ Levine, *Representative Identity*, 191.

²¹² A number of critics have noted that the narrator’s treatment of the novel’s protagonist all but mandates that we recognize him as a kind of prospective savior. Roger Hite sees *Blake* as “artistic support for a major underlying assertion: that religion, as practiced by slaves, was counterproductive to their pursuit of freedom... If the novel has any dominant theme, it is Delany’s constant attack on the hypocrisy of ‘the religion of the oppressor’” (Hite, 194). And yet, Hite notes, the book is not straightforwardly anti-religious, since, after defiantly rejecting orthodox slave religion, Henry Blake undergoes a “conversion from slave to Messiah,” a prophet of the “gospel of insurrection” (Hite, 198, 199). Robert Levine argues that the novel directs its readers to see Blake as “a prophetic redeemer, a black Moses *and* a black Christ, who will be attempting to liberate the ‘weak’ from the ‘strong’” (Levine, 193). Indeed, according to Robert Carr, Henry Blake is none other than “the black revolutionary incarnation of the Godhead – literally the Second Coming” (Carr, 54).

Curiously, the narrator does not draw any kind of connection between the murder and Blake's subsequent, disconsolate musing, though the two events occupy literally consecutive sentences. Instead, Blake's anxiety is abstracted, and projected into politics, as Blake comes to realize that the successful implementation of his scheme will require more willpower than he has, and indeed, more than human willpower. The balance Blake strikes between divine submission and self-reliance is sustained only by constant vigilance and frequent renegotiation.

Alone "in the wilderness, determining to renew his faith and dependence upon Divine aid," Blake falls to his knees and petitions the heavens: "Arm of the Lord, awake! Renew my faith, confirm my hope, perfect me in love. Give me strength, give me courage, guide and direct my pathway, and direct me in my course!" (B, 69). Then, "as if a weight had fallen from him, he stood up a new man" (B, 69). His submission to and reliance on divinity thus reaffirmed, Blake is still tested by a landscape over-freighted with moral significance: he must cross the Red River, "too deep to wade, and on account of numerous sharks and alligators, too dangerous to swim" (B, 69). Alarmed by the sound of an approaching steamer, Blake seeks refuge in a cove, only to discover, "to his terror," that he is surrounded by "a squad of huge alligators, which sought the advantages of the sunshine" (B, 69).

His first impulse was to surrender himself to his fate and be devoured... escape being impossible except by the way he entered, to do which would have exposed him to the view of the boat... Meantime the frightful animals were crawling over and among each other, at a fearful rate.

Seizing the fragment of a limb which lay in the cove, beating upon the ground and yelling like a madman... the beasts were frightened at such a rate, that they reached the water in less time than Henry reached the bank. Receding into the forest, he thus escaped the observation of the passing steamer, his escape serving to strengthen his faith in a renewed determination of spiritual dependence. (B, 70).

This strangely allegorical set piece serves several functions. Most clearly, it posits slavery as a fate worse even than death by alligator, thus reaffirming Blake's conviction to remain free at any conceivable personal cost. It likewise accentuates the mutual inhospitability of the "wilderness" Henry must navigate, and the fact that every white he encounters potentially doubles as a roving patrol, legally mandated to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act and take him into custody. More puzzlingly, the scene deposits Henry right back where he started: on the wrong side of the river. After yet another "solemn reflection for Divine aid to direct him," Blake finds – in anticlimactically short order – a natural raft that spans the river's width and affords him safe crossing. With this mundane coincidence, coded by the narrative (implicitly but somehow blatantly) as a miracle, "His faith was now fully established, and thenceforth, Henry was full of hope and confident of success" (B, 70).

Forever teetering on the edge of belief and doubt, hope and despair, Blake's conviction must continually be renewed – and, simultaneously, his submission to a higher power must be continually reaffirmed. Yolanda Pierce has identified two distinctive features in nineteenth-century African-American conversion narratives. First, "the quest for literacy" serve as "an integral part of the conversion experience in African-American narratives. Literacy becomes linked with conversion in that the thirst for literacy equals (and supersedes in some instances) the thirst for knowledge of salvation and God."²¹³ Second, these narratives "resemble Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. The supernatural world, where God himself intervenes and alters the laws of the universe,

²¹³ Yolanda Pierce, "'How Saul Became Paul': The African-American Conversion Experience," *The Griot* 19:2 (Fall 2000), 1-17, 7.

collides with the physical world resulting in signs and wonders, callings and responses,” and, in the new convert, “a transformation so complete that it facilitated a change of identity, even a change of name.”²¹⁴

In *Blake*, the quest for literacy is almost irrelevant, which partly explains why it has been somewhat neglected by critics like Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker, who valued Frederick Douglass for his dramatization of the acquisition of literacy (and literariness) in all its fragmented splendor. Though he narrates his own crucial conversion experience – he learns to read – Douglass, writes Gates, “has been a trickster. As with all mediations, the trickster is a mediator and his mediation is a trick – only a trick – for there can be no mediation in this world.”²¹⁵ True or not, this metaphysical claim finds little support in *Blake*, which precisely depicts acts of mediation. *Blake*’s world is not *this* world, and Blake’s medium of charismatic communication obviates the need for the kind of self-reflexive literacy that stands in for consciousness in the criticism of the linguistic turn.

By comparison, representations of consciousness in *Blake* are remarkably flat. In the type of conversion experience it imagines, Delany’s novel finds a kindred spirit less in Douglass’s *Narrative* than in great Methodist evangelist George Whitefield. Nancy Ruttenburg writes, “Offering himself to his audiences as a charismatic model of the ‘new man’ – both an exemplary convert and a masterful converter of others – Whitefield used his ‘wonderful Power’ to mobilize people in the name of a new vision of personal,

²¹⁴ Pierce, 10.

²¹⁵ Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 93.

spiritual, and community life. This vision entailed the establishment of a radical itinerant ministry in each of the major colonial denominations” (430).²¹⁶ Just as Blake is made a new man, through a kind of divine intervention, Blake is, in his capacity as a divine proxy, able to make men anew.

So, for instance, Blake encounters a “young mulatto freeman” named Lewis Grimes, who is chained to the deck of a southbound steamship (B, 83). Grimes has, he laments, been “stolen” by a white man, and is being taken to Texas, where he anticipates being “enslaved for life!” (B, 82). To Blake’s suggestion that he run away, Grimes retorts that he is handcuffed and closely guarded. Blake’s subsequent advice functions, again, as the trigger for an awakening:

“Well don’t you submit, die first if thereby you must take another into eternity with you! Were it my case and he ever went to sleep where I was, he’d never waken in this world!”

“I never thought of that before, I shall take your advice the first opportunity. Good-bye sir!” (B, 82)

Though Grimes does not *learn* anything new, per se, Blake does *inspire* him to adopt a posture of vengeful militancy. His presence and passion furnish an abrupt shift in Grimes’s consciousness. Grimes, however, drifts off down the river, still handcuffed on the ship’s deck, never to be heard from again in this novel.

The only prerequisite for those prospective initiates who would learn the secret is the desire – however latent or deeply buried – to be free. However straightforward this seems, Delany’s idiosyncratic conception of discipline complicates things. Throughout his career, Delany used slavery and freedom in different, but not always distinguishable, senses – sometimes as terms to describe material conditions, and sometimes as terms to

²¹⁶ Nancy Ruttenburg, “George Whitefield, Spectacular Conversion, and the Rise of Democratic Personality.” *American Literary History*. 5.3 (1993): 429-458.

describe opposed modes of consciousness. In his somewhat neglected pamphlet on “The Origin and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry,” Delany offers a miniature taxonomy of slave types, in which he distances certain types of unsympathetic slaves – “the criminal and the voluntary bondsman,” who have “forfeited their Masonic rights by willing degradation” – from “the captive, an entirely different person... who has greater claims upon our sympathies than the untrammelled freeman” (R, 57). Such captives embody “the brave, the high-minded, the independent-spirited, and manly form of a kindred brother in humanity, whose heart is burning, whose breast is heaving, and whose soul is wrung with panting aspirations for liberty – a commander, a chieftain, a knight, or a prince, it may be – still he is a captive and by the laws of captivity, a slave” (R, 57).

Clearly, the concept of enslavement sketched here is spiritual or psychological in character, and not at all dependent on an individual’s legal status or de facto social role. When princes and captives meet on a level field, Delany writes, each greets the other as “a kindred brother in humanity,” and each recognizes in the other a “longing aspiration for liberty, and a manly determination to be free” (R, 58). If a captive’s “*mind* and *desires*” are “*free*,” and his “*person*... unencumbered with all earthly trammels or fetters,” he merits initiation and instruction (R, 58). Only the man “who *voluntarily* compromised his liberty was recognized as a slave by Masons,” Delany argues, as illustrated by the fact that “Moses, (to whom our great Grand Master Solomon, the founder of the temple, is indebted for his Masonic wisdom,) was born and lived in captivity for eighty years, and by the laws of his captors a slave” (R, 57-58).

If slavery is an inherently and absolutely illegitimate system that is only legitimated through casuistic manipulations and cynical corruptions of jurisprudence,

Blake seems to argue, it is *especially* illegitimate for someone like Henry Blake (who is himself a great deal like Moses). The novel form allows Delany to imagine, in the character of Henry Blake, a black man who is simultaneously free and enslaved, elect and exiled, high born and debased – a deposed noble awaiting restoration. Blake, then, begins as an exile, a nomadic interloper who agitates against white power in white power’s epicenter: the plantation system. Even while he is still Colonel Franks’s slave, in the eyes of the law, Blake rejects the idea that his enslavement is significant as an experiential reality. Because he does not consent to it, he is unimpressed by its formal existence. “I’m not your slave,” he tells Franks, “nor never was and you know it! And but for my wife and her people, I never would have stayed with you till now” (B, 19). Blake conceives of slavery as a battle of wills with the Colonel, who, he says, “seeks every opportunity to crush out my lingering manhood, and reduce my free spirit to the submission of a slave. He cannot do it, I will not submit to it, and I defy his power to make me submit” (B, 29). This concrete and traumatic instance of injustice brings Blake into acute awareness of the systemic injustice built into the American scene. Henry is able to free himself through an exercise of agency, simply by refusing to accept the legitimacy of his enslavement, suggesting that, in the world of *Blake*, slavery entails tacit submission.

Henry Blake’s central objection to the extant black church is precisely that it has been instrumentalized *at the expense of black people*, and made to serve the interests of the plantocratic hegemony. As he tells his cousin Placido, “I still believe in God, and have faith in His promises; but serving Him in the way that I was, I had only ‘the shadow without the substance,’ the religion of my oppressors, I thank God that He timely opened my eyes” (B, 197). If, Blake reasons, blacks were to “drop the religion of our oppressors,

and take the Scriptures for our guide and Christ as our example,” they might cease to “be disciplined in our worship, obedience [sic] as slaves to our master, the slaveholders, by associating in our mind with that religion, submission to the oppressor’s will” (B, 197). It is impossible to practice “the religion of our oppressors” without simultaneously becoming “disciplined” into “submission.”

In an editorial aside, *Blake*’s narrator posits that slavery is as much a state of mind as a material condition. He observes two types of “discipline” – one imposed, the other achieved:

The mere slave, as such, was deficient in discipline, except that which unfitted him for self-reliance. That was the curse which blighted his moral prospects, the blow which riveted upon him the links of an unyielding chain; the burden which, with mountain weight, pressed his mind to the earth, only to be thrown off by the force of an extraordinary self-exertion, verified the sentiment that –

The day that makes a man a slave,
Takes half his worth away. (B, 239).

Slaves lack the good kind of discipline that would enable self-reliance, but they are disciplined by the ideological constraints of white supremacy. These images – the “unyielding chain” and “mountain weight” – figure, for Delany, an actual condition of mental and psychic debasement and dependence, which can only be broken or thrown off by “the force of an extraordinary self-exertion.” But this self-exertion is not self-generating – not even in the case of Henry Blake, who only rebels against his enslavement after he learns Maggie, his wife, has been sold.

Glenn Hendler has argued that Blake’s personal trauma serves as the catalyst for his (seemingly literal) conversion experience: “Blake is always already ideologically coherent, and his plan is fully formed from the moment it comes to him after his wife is

sold.”²¹⁷ In this sense – its immediate, almost autotelic *conceptual* maturity coupled with its perpetual *practical* unreadiness – Blake’s plan partakes in “the charismatic ideology of creation” derided by Pierre Bourdieu. This ideology, Bourdieu writes, “prevents us asking who has created this ‘creator’ and the magic power of transubstantiation with which the ‘creator’ is endowed... thereby avoiding any enquiry beyond the artist and the artist’s own activity into the conditions of the demiurgic capability.”²¹⁸ For Bourdieu, this way of thinking is a pernicious mystification obscuring the fields of fields of social and productive forces that create the “creator,” by lending the creation an intelligible social context.

In *Blake*, this charismatic ideology is a tropological gambit. Delany dares us to believe that Blake possesses some “magic power of transubstantiation.” Upon first revealing his plan, Blake is filled “with fear and trembling, at the thought of what has been the fate of all previous matters of this kind. I approach it with religious fear, and hardly think us fit for the task; at least, I know I am not. But as no one has ever originated, or given us anything of the kind, I suppose I may venture” (B, 38). Nervous about the failure of previous insurrectionary plots, and confident of the absolute novelty of his own insurrectionary plot, Blake places himself within the tradition of slave resistance – but he also exceeds that tradition, and inaugurates something new. Almost simultaneously, that is, Blake directs our attention to “previous matters of this kind,” and denies that “anything of the kind” has ever been “originated.” We are meant to take seriously the claim that the book’s protagonist is “the Leader of the Army of

²¹⁷ Hendler, *Public Sentiments*, 72.

²¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 167.

Emancipation and originator of the scheme to redeem them from slavery and an almost helpless degradation,” but we are not – any more than the book’s characters – meant to know when the blueprint is ready to become a building (B, 251).

By means of this charismatic ideology, Blake is able to engineer a division of labor, and to delegate interests, tasks, and objects to various (subordinate but collaborative) associates. We see this most strikingly in Blake’s delegation of murder. A prodigious a planner and leader, Blake is ill equipped to strike the first blow in the general uprising, and is less willing to kill in cold blood, than he is to advise others to do the same. This realization, though, prompts him to a conceptual innovation: a curious division of labor takes shape in the organization, most particularly in his delegation of violent rebellion and lethal force. In the next scene, after he has crossed the river of symbolism, Blake learns of a brutal slave driver named Jesse, who “treat black folks like dog, he all de time beat ‘em, when da no call to do it... Da white folks make ‘im bad” (B, 77). Blake promises that, “after tonight, he’ll never whip another” (B, 77). Asking after “a real clever good trusty man,” Blake is directed to Moses, a former preacher, who once “kill a man, ole po’ white oveeseah!” (B, 79). The two men confer – off-screen, as it were, out of earshot of the reader. “The next day Jesse the driver was missed, and never after heard of. On inquiry being made of the old man Moses concerning the stranger, all that could be elicited was, ‘Stan’ still child’en, and see da salvation uv da Laud!’” (B, 79). Presumably, Moses has murdered Jesse – but only *presumably*, since Jesse simply goes missing. The secretive nature of this act means it is rebellious without being revolutionary; it is intended to ameliorate the material condition of this particular slave

community, without inciting more violence, or even overtly demonstrating that black violence against white authority is possible.

Blake is willing, he says, to “do anything not morally wrong, to gain our freedom; and to effect this, we must take the slaves, not as we wish them to be, but as we really find them to be” (B, 126). Having reconvened with Charles and Andy in Mississippi, Blake complains that “this confounded ‘good treatment’ and expectation of getting freed by their masters... has been the curse of the slave.” The well-treated slave’s contentment “makes him obedient and willing to serve and toil on, looking forward to the promised redemption. This is just the case precisely now in Kentucky. It was my case.” Indeed, he admits, if Colonel Franks had continued to treat Blake well, “I would doubtless have been with him yet... A ‘good master’ is the very worst of masters. Were they all cruel and inhuman, or could the slaves be made to see their treatment aright, they would not endure their oppression for a single hour!” (B, 127).

“Had I dealt with Franks as he deserved, for doing that for which he would have taken the life of any man had it been his case – tearing my wife from my bosom! – the most I could take courage directly to do, was to leave him, and take as many from him as I could induce to go. But maturer reflection drove me to the expedient of avenging the general wrongs of our people, by inducing the slave, in his might, to scatter red ruin throughout the region of the South. But still, I cannot find it in my heart to injure an individual, except in personal conflict.”

“An has yeh done it, Henry?” earnestly inquired Andy.

“Yes, Andy; yes, I have done it! and I thank God for it! I have taught the slave that mighty lesson: to strike for Liberty. ‘Rather to die as freemen, than live as slaves!’” (B, 128)

It is not easy to say which question Andy asks, nor which question Blake answers: Did Blake kill a man in personal conflict? Did he succeed in teaching the slaves to scatter ruin? Exactly how did he teach “the slaves that mighty lesson: to strike for Liberty”? This pattern – from indecisive hesitation to an assertion of divinely inspired self-assurance – recurs throughout the novel, and mirrors Blake’s oscillation between enthusiasm for

revolutionary violence and his tendency to undercut that enthusiasm by taking a cautious, wait-and-see approach.

Delany observes, in *The Condition*, that the “colored races” are “highly susceptible of religion,” and that this would be a crowning virtue, but for the fact that “they carry it too far. Their hope is largely developed, and consequently, they usually stand still – hope in God, and really expect Him to do that for them, which it is necessary that they should do themselves (Con, 64). As Delany sees it, an overdeveloped adherence to the black church fosters submission to white authority, and to a kind of quietism that places salvation steadfastly in the hereafter. This pernicious tendency towards quietism and abjection, Delany writes, “arises from a misconception of the character and ways of the deity” (Con, 64). Delany traces God’s existence in three discrete spheres – the “*Spiritual*, *Moral*, and *Physical*” – each of which obeys its own “natural” law of development, and each of which can be influenced by a corresponding form of human activity. What’s more, “a compliance with or a violation of either of these laws determines the result of all human affairs” (R, 154). In their reliance on prayer to redress earthly injustices and imbalances, Delany argues, black people habitually misalign their actions and their intended goals: “we make use of heavenly means for the attainment of earthly ends, while our oppressors make use of earthly means for the attainment of earthly ends” (R, 155). They *can* influence the “*Physical*” domain, but *only*, Delany writes, by “go[ing] to *work*” (Con, 65). For this reason, Delany’s most strident message is, “Our elevation must be the result of *self-efforts*, and work of our *own hands*” (Con, 71).

In the best traditions of self-reliant reformism, Delany hoped that black achievement would hasten the demise of antiblack racism, and throughout his political writing, he consistently championed the causes of liberation, equality, and universal fraternity. The instruments he advocated in pursuit of these ends – elevation (of status) and accumulation (of capital) – were considerably worldlier. Delany’s “self-help frame of reference,” writes Floyd J. Miller, presupposed an American social field “so fluid that blacks who worked diligently, learned trades, followed moral precepts, and practiced personal thrift could overcome the burdens of caste.”²¹⁹ If, Delany reasoned, whites are authorized to instruct and advise blacks

in religion, in medicine, in law, then may we also, if we only determine that it shall be so, sell to them as well as buy from them; give advice to them in matters of religion, medicine, and law, as well as receive advice from them in these matters. But we must qualify ourselves for these various departments first, which is comparatively an easy matter. We must have farmers, mechanics, and shopkeepers generally among us. By these occupations we make money – these are the true sources of wealth. Give us wealth and we can obtain all the rest. (R, 155-56)

Production and consumption could become a two-way street, if only blacks could control their share of capital and the means of production.

This clash in Delany’s writing, between optimism for future elevation and his tendency to chide blacks who were not yet “elevated,” caused something of a conceptual problem. As Miller puts it, “The peculiarly critical nature of his self-help ideology compelled him to view as laggards those blacks who failed to rise in the social order. On the other hand, his perceptions of the existing reality led Delany to acknowledge that the restrictions placed upon blacks made no allowance for ability or respectability” (Miller,

²¹⁹ Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787-1863* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1975), 120.

123). If blacks were responsible for their own debasement – even partially, even if only by misguided complicity – then it followed that individual self-exertion would be sufficient to gain, if not equality, at least respectability. However, if hard work, good manners, and measurable success had no effect on systemic discrimination, then blacks’ ambitions would be exposed as quixotic pretensions. The potential ability of black individuals to better themselves was nothing less than a microcosm for the ability of black people to better their world.

Ill-treated slaves are especially primed to receive Blake’s plan precisely by their experience in slavery. The “character of this organization,” Blake says, is such that “punishment and misery are made the instruments for its propagation... Every blow you receive from the oppressor impresses the organization upon your mind, making it so clear that even Whitehead’s Jack could understand it as well as his master” (B, 40). As such, abuse, mistreatment, and oppression become instruments in their own overcoming. Like that strain of Marxian utopianism whose hopes for revolution are predicated on capitalism’s ever-increasing brutality and the perfection of its exploitative apparatus, the ultimate success of Blake’s plan is actually threatened by the prospect of moderate reform. Whereas contentment breeds complacency, the frustrated experience of injustice serves as the fuse for revolutionary change.

The best-treated and most contented slaves he encounters, in Kentucky, are also the least amenable to Blake’s brand of education. He finds that, though they share “a universal desire for freedom, there were few who were willing to strike. To run away, with them, seemed to be the highest conceived idea of their right to liberty. This they were doing, and would continue to do on every favorable opportunity, but their right to

freedom by self-resistance, to them was forbidden by the Word of God.” They have, in other words, misinterpreted – or failed to *re*interpret – the injunction to “stand still,” since their fondest anticipation is of what white people can do for them, rather than what they can do for themselves – which is to say, in the logic of the novel, what Henry Blake can teach them to do for themselves. “Satisfied that self-reliance was the furthest from their thoughts, but impressing them with new ideas concerning their rights, the great-hearted runaway bid them ‘Good bye, and may God open your eyes to see your own condition!’” (B, 123). Again, Blake’s lesson is encapsulated in a conversion experience – a visionary glimpse of the “condition” of life, though it is, in this case, a vision unseen.

Institutionalized Charisma: Parliament in Cuba

Vehement opposition to white claims of mastery over black experience or black reality is a key refrain throughout Delany’s generically multifarious body of work. In a characteristic instance, he rebukes those (white) “politicians, religionists, and abolitionists,” who “presumed to *think* for, dictate to, and *know* better what suited colored people, than they knew for themselves” (Con, 38). The problem was not simply that these pretensions of superior understanding were misguided or delusional; they corroded the reality inhabited by black people and white people alike. For antebellum black intellectuals like Delany, argues Vincent Harding, the impetus to create an autonomous infrastructure of black institutions “was tied to the defiant black movement beyond the white structures of slavery... Indeed, organization was a testing, a proof of black capacities for ‘self-improvement,’ a denial of white rights to create the black world.”²²⁰

²²⁰ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) 130.

Delany “recognized the brokenness of the black community and searched urgently for the setting in which healing might take place,” whether that setting was to be within or without the boundaries of the United States. Delany’s various projects, Harding observes, “were part of the movement toward a positive freedom which was the core of his larger vocation”; his legacy serves as “a reminder that independent black organizing was in itself an intimation of the future’s wholeness, a suggestion that black people might one day repossess their lives.”²²¹ From this perspective, it is impossible to disentangle *Blake* from the long histories of black struggle, resistance, activism, and radicalism. Delany’s constant goal was the elevation of his race, and his efforts were always in the service of that goal: In a culture of white supremacist hegemony and slave power, a black man publicizing his own exemplarity, even extraordinariness, is a clearly radical idea.

It is also, in significant ways, profoundly retrograde. Blake’s organization can usefully be compared to Eric Hoffer’s concept of the mass movement. In *The True Believer*, Hoffer observes,

The uncanny powers of a leader manifest themselves not so much in the hold he has on the masses as in his ability to dominate and almost bewitch a small group of able men. These men must be fearless, proud, intelligent and capable of organizing and running large-scale undertakings, and yet they must submit wholly to the will of the leader, draw their inspiration and driving force from him, and glory in this submission.²²²

As I have suggested, individual knowledge of the secret inheres in the experience of comprehending, or becoming conscious of, one’s place in the black community, and the black community’s oppression by the white establishment. It is an experiential, not a factual, truth; better yet, it is a kind of posture – but a posture that can only be struck after

²²¹ Harding, 130-131.

²²² Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010) 114-15.

Blake is identified and recognized as the head of the organization, whether this recognition takes a vaguely Protestant or strictly secular form.

In an incisive critique of charismatic leadership's role in twentieth century black political and literary culture, Erica R. Edwards argues that, "as a structuring fiction for liberatory politics, charisma is founded in three forms of violence" – historical, social, and epistemological.²²³ The fiction collapses the historical richness of "a heterogeneous black freedom struggle" to make room for disingenuous, "top-down narrative of Great Man leadership"; it "perform[s] social change in the form of a fundamentally antidemocratic form of authority"; and it "structur[es] knowledge of black political subjectivity and movement within a gendered hierarchy of political value that grants uninterrogated power to normative masculinity." Though I hesitate to describe any narrative frame as categorically violent, Edwards's insights map well onto *Blake's* dramatization of the charismatic will to power. Rather than simply withholding Blake's mysterious message, the book performs a kind of a dialectical oscillation between revelation and concealment, between opacity and transparency. The secret operates as a kind of black box, a closed system whose operations are indistinguishable to outside observers, and only fully intelligible to Blake himself. In this, Blake is a great deal like Moses, who, Edwards writes, "in the mythical story of political revolution and national founding, is definitive of charisma."²²⁴ As an intermediary positioned between the profane and the transcendent, Moses is able to squelch all opposition, settle all debate,

²²³ Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2012), xv.

²²⁴ Edwards, 82.

and secure consent on the grounds of a super-rational insight into the unseen, divine Word. Moses serves “as the supermasculine translator of God’s authority; the ‘proofs’ confirming his appointment as charismatic leader all issue from his potent rod.”²²⁵

Rodless or not, Blake is the “Arm of the Lord,” and as such, the instrumental manifestation of divine will. Though the analogy can be stretched too far, it is instructive to place Blake’s organization in the context of Hanna Arendt’s description of authoritarianism, as a pyramid-shaped “governmental structure whose source of authority lies outside itself, but whose seat of power is located at the top, from which authority and power is filtered down to the base in such a way that each successive layer possesses some authority, but less than the one above it.”²²⁶ Blake’s authority, like Moses’, is predicated on his position as an intermediary – a servant of God. In fact, Blake increasingly attributes the workings of the plan, and his own actions, to God’s agency. In a prayer before the Cuban Council, he affirms, “We are more and more sensible that without thy divine aid, we can do nothing. O, guide and direct us in this the greatest of undertakings: be a leader in our wilderness traveling; director of our wilderness wanderings; chief in our wilderness warfare... Be our great Captain, I pray thee” (B, 292). Blake’s protestations of personal inadequacy and ineptitude become especially significant insofar as they shift the locus of responsibility, agency, and authority upwards, from Blake’s fragilely contingent personhood to Providential design.

²²⁵ Edwards, 85.

²²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968).

At the same time, Blake accrues an almost comical array of honorary titles, distinctions, and positions. He is, according to the narrator, “the Leader of the Army of Emancipation and originator of the scheme to redeem them from slavery and an almost helpless degradation” (B, 251); he is “the leader of the great movement” (B, 263); he is elected “the President of the Council and Commander in Chief” (B, 285). In the closing pages, Blake comes to be called, by his colleagues and the narrator both, “the Chief” (B, 290). All other men and women are, if not Blake’s servants, certainly not his equals. In the second half of the novel, Blake becomes a ranking official, and his organization becomes a rank-and-file administration. In Weberian terms, his prestige and influence are increasingly routinized and upheld by a bureaucratic network. Genuine charisma, Weber explains, “cannot remain stable” in its “pure form,” because it “rests on the legitimization of personal heroism or personal revelation. Yet precisely this quality of charisma as an extraordinary, supernatural, divine power transforms it, after routinization, into a suitable source for the legitimate acquisition of sovereign power by the successors of the charismatic hero” (ES, 262). If its beneficiaries are to “enjoy a secure social position in place of the kind of discipleship which is cut off from ordinary worldly connections,” charismatic authority must be “traditionalized or rationalized” (ES, 246).

As Robert Levine sees it, the organization comes to function as “a sort of black Masonic network in the slave South, with himself as grand master.”²²⁷ I want to argue Blake, in fact, abandons his Southern organization because it is not *enough* like a Masonic network – it is too geographically vast, composed of too many disparate communities, and too outmanned by white slave power. If the novel’s first half follows a

²²⁷ Levine, 195.

quasi-secular reverend's evangelical mission through the slave states, its second half dramatizes the construction of a kind of church on those same quasi-secular principles. In contrast to the sprawling network necessary to cover the entirety of the American South, Cuba affords a considerably more intimate setting for association, which comes to be characterized by sustained relationships and precisely delegated vocational roles. This Cuban coalition quickly sprouts parliamentary and military branches, elects officials, and formalizes command chains. What emerges is not a radically democratic community, nor an authoritarian regime, but a constellation of new status groups which strive to preserve, enhance, and consolidate the powers and privilege they are able to force into being.

In its new location, and under new management structure, the movement achieves a kind of frictionless self-direction: "so completely were they organised, and systematic their plans, that whatever might be going on among them in Matanzas those in Havana were conversant with it, and that which might take place in Havana was at once known to... every part of the colony" (B, 282). The organization aims towards broad democratization, and simultaneously erects and legitimates, in its corporate structure, a stratified hierarchy of legislators and leaders. In the first case, the Council's first order of business is to determine its "policy"; Blake insists, "The rules laid down, whatever they may be, should be plain, simple, and at once comprehensible to every black person, however illiterate" (B, 285). As with his earlier declaration that even "the stupidest" slaves will have equal access, Blake here aims to create a kind of transparent Constitution that mediates without signifying. It must be understood on the basis, not of what one knows, but of identity. Everyone is, potentially, included – the question is, included in what?

Certainly not in the “Council,” a governing body of notables and worthies whose merit is determined by some undisclosed organ of evaluation. The Council is initially composed of “unacquainted” officials, who share “doubts and fears... not only for their fidelity to each other, but also of their acceptance on account of their humble social positions as inferiors and domestics in society” (B, 283). The narrator endorses their presence and membership, since each among them has “been redeemed from the degradation of captivity, chosen among the self-reliant of their people, received into seclusion and acknowledged as equals in the Council” (B, 282). This ostensibly democratic flatness is misleading, however, as it sidesteps a clear disciplinary hierarchy. That the members of the Council are treated as “equals in the Council” is not surprising, since the representative leaders are initiated into what amounts to a secret society, “to whom alone the Hero was known.” When the President and General enters one seclusion, “as if by magic, the whole company simultaneously rose to their feet”; an “amateur orchestra, instrumental and vocal,” strikes up a song, “in strains most impressive,” whose lyric begins, “All hail thou true and noble chief / Who scorned to live a cowering slave; / Thy name shall stand on history’s leaf, / Amid the mighty and the brave!” (B, 250). Blake has a pretty good gig, perks-wise; on the other hand, when one seclusion is scheduled to begin, “a servant enter[s] the drawing room announcing that the Council Chamber was in readiness” (B, 282). The rest of this servant’s life is lived off the page, while the narrator attends to the magistrates who aim to inherit the legitimate governance of Cuba.

Ensconced in his new base of operations, Blake seems altogether to forget about his designs on, and associates in, the American South. In fact, I would argue, Blake’s two organizations are essentially independent – isolated each from the other, seemingly

without contact. The Cuban revolutionaries can expect no foreign aid in their struggle because, Placido explains, though “Hayti is a noble self-emancipated nation,” she is “not able to aid us,” and Liberia is “too weak, and too far off” (B, 289). The possibility of aid from the syndicate Blake has organized throughout the American South is not even mentioned. Blake further emphasizes the necessity of communal self-reliance: “you must ‘tread the winepress alone’ so far as earthly aid is concerned, only looking above to He who ‘tempers the storm to the shorn lamb’ and directs the destiny of nations” (B, 289).

So, the charismatic community becomes an inchoate institution, locked in corporate competition with the white establishment. In the book’s second half, insurrection is eclipsed by diplomacy – or so it has seemed to some of Delany’s most discerning readers. Over time, the organization, writes Christopher Castiglia,

becomes an end in itself. The institutional drive of Delany’s ‘organization’ directs revolutionary impulses away from material equality and toward internalized ‘readiness.’ But ‘readiness’ within Blake’s organization, as within institutionally more generally, is a never-ending business... orienting citizens always toward institutional abstraction and its horizon of futurity where... revolution hovers as the (never recovered) fulfillment of a labor that in and of itself proves unsatisfying.²²⁸

Yet revolution remains a powerful rhetorical device, and a latent political force. As Blake tells the assembled Council, “You know my errand among you; you know my sentiments. I am for war – war upon the whites. ‘I come to bring deliverance to the captive and freedom to the bond.’ Your destiny is my destiny; the end of one will be the end of all” (B, 290).

On the other hand, the revolutionary army does relatively little in the way of revolutionary war, at least in the narrative as we have it. Speeches are made; debates are

²²⁸ Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 226.

had; consensus is reached and broken; resolutions are passed; but threats of revolutionary activity are consistently punctuated by hiccups and hesitations. To take one striking instance:

“In the name of God, I now declare war against our oppressors, provided Spain does not redress our grievances!” proclaimed Blake (B, 292).

Blake’s declaration of war – precisely the performative utterance that should change the army’s real status from a state of peace to a state of war – is immediately undercut by the provision that, should Spain prove amenable to negotiation, *war will not already have been declared*. Blacks in Cuba are not loyal to Spain because Spain has not enfranchised blacks in Cuba; their revolutionary ardor is a function of their status as non-citizens. They have “petitioned and prayed for a redress of grievances,” but been met with ridicule, and subject to “greater restrictions” by the existing government. So, argues Placido to the Council, if the Grand Army were to “strike for liberty, it must also be for independent self-government, because we have the prejudices of the mother-country and the white colonists alike to contend against. Whereas, were we, as we should be, enfranchised by Spain we would then only have the opposition of Cuba and Porto Rico, and should be loyal to Spain” (B, 289).

Because both diplomacy and insurrection remain viable, if opposed, strategies, the book’s second half preserves the division of labor that delegated violence to those with violent tendencies. Because of this, I depart from Jeffory A. Clymer, who claims that “Blake embodies the possibility... that Cuba’s wealthy people of color can learn to forego their class privilege and instead join forces with the island’s slave population in an

effort to overthrow Spanish rule and form a Pan-African republic.”²²⁹ For Clymer, this is exemplified by Gofer Gondolier, a disillusioned chef who is inspired to a new degree of aggressive militancy after a white merchant seizes and horsewhips Ambrosina, a black woman, for accidentally bumping into his wife in the street – an exhibition of arbitrary violence and cruelty as unjust as it is legally permissible. This scene, Clymer argues, “dissolves class distinctions among people of color by inciting the black working-class cook... to acts of revolutionary violence.”²³⁰ But this fact reinforces class distinctions as much as it dissolves them. Gondolier’s willingness to take up the role of hostile insurgent frees the black gentry to occupy less volatile, and presumably less dangerous, roles in the revolutionary coalition. Gofer guards the door during seclusions, “armed with a cutlass and his fearful Cuban carver” (B, 283). He declares himself “anxious to do somethin’, an’ ef the general there hurry up this thing an’ give me a chance, I’ll show ‘im what I kin do. I’m no speaker, but whenever there’s any carving to be done, give me a chance; I’m your man” (B, 291). But his *willingness* to engage in “acts of revolutionary violence” is not the same as *agency*; Gofer cannot legitimate the use of violence himself.

In the book’s final scene – a meeting of the Council in seclusion to discuss the attack on Ambrosina – Placido hears the council members’ “sighs, tears, prayers and expressions of vengeance by Gofer Gondolier, who had no scruples in assuming to himself this particular duty of political dispensation” (B, 311). Here, the division of labor becomes more explicit, as the infantryman and enforcer comes up against the authority of

²²⁹ Jeffery A. Clymer, “Martin Delany’s *Blake* and the Transnational Politics of Property,” *American Literary History* 15.4 (Winter 2003): 709-731, 723.

²³⁰ Clymer, 727.

the Council, as embodied in the Council's "Minister of War and Navy," Montego – a man of "wealth and refinement." Gofer complains,

"...we ought to by this time be able to redress our grievances. Some men are born to command and others to obey; and it is well that this is the case, else I might be a commander; and ef I was, I might command when orders should not be given."

"This is you [sic] failing, Gondolier," said Montego; "and one good reason why you should not hold command. I want no better under-officer, as orders received would be strictly executed."

"Yes, General, I know my 'failing,' and it's useless to talk to me about 'policy' and nonsense when a bloodhound is tearing out my vitals. 'Discretion' at such a time. Give me a revolver, knife, club, brickbat, or anything with which to defend myself, and I'll put a varment to flight" (B, 310)

Gondolier delivers the book's famous last line, though more than once it has misattributed it to Blake: "Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!" (B, 313). It's easy to miss the echo, here, of the drunkard Tibs's pernicious and over-eager call for "Insurrection! Insurrection! Death to every white!" (B, 106). The crucial distinction is that, where Tibs is uncontrollable – outside the discipline of the organization – Gofer is willing to submit to the leadership of the Council. His inclusion is predicated on his subordination, and his subordination is necessitated – as with Tibs – by his desire for vengeance. Gofer, too, must stand still and see the salvation – must wait until the appointed time.

Extending the Gilroyian logic of communitarian solidarity to Delany's Masonic attachments, Corey D.B. Walker argues that Masonry offered Delany "a critical oppositional strategy designed to inaugurate his vision of an African diasporic nation."²³¹ (A Noble Flight, 110). In *Blake*, writes Walker, "Delany seizes on and revolutionizes the

²³¹ Corey D.B. Walker, *A Noble Fight: African American Freemasonry and the Struggle for Democracy in America* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 2008), 111.

radically egalitarian and democratic principles of the fraternity as Blake instructs his collaborators that ‘All you have to do, is to find one good man or woman.’”²³² While there were certainly democratic elements and democratizing tendencies in antebellum Freemasonry, particularly in the black community, the exclusive emphasis on these elements and tendencies elides half the story. As Margaret C. Jacob has shown, the characteristic “masonic identity” was keyed to “the belief that merit and not birth constitutes the foundation for social and political order” (Jacob, 9). However meritocratic, Freemasonry was not “inherently democratic in the modern sense. Although they spoke of all brothers as ‘equal,’ this did not obviate the role the lodges played as places that replicated social hierarchy and order... The lodges mirrored the old order just as they were creating a form of civil society that would ultimately replace it.”²³³

Delany’s own tract on Freemasonry is both an attack on and a defense of freemasonry’s elitism. Masonry, he writes, was “originally intended for the better government of man,” but this mission has waned, while the exclusion and social stigmatization of oppressed peoples have become the norm (R, 52). He sums up the Masonic lineage – and its moral-pedagogical imperative – thus:

What is God that man should be his image, and what knowledge should man obtain in order to be like God? This wisdom was possessed in the

²³² Walker, 111. Walker’s broader argument is that “the African American appropriation of... Freemasonry provides a critical medium in and through which African Americans formulate a contingent sense of communal identity, racial solidarity, and national belonging. In turn, these constructions that are formulated in and articulated through this cultural medium permit the production of certain ideas and practices of democracy in the African American political imagination that negotiate and manage the contradictory, paradoxical, and ironic landscape of democracy in the United States” (Walker, *A Noble Fight*, 4). This seems to me spot-on; I object only to the narrower implications of “radical” democracy and egalitarianism, disencumbered from the drive to authority inseparable from political organization.

²³³ In the unlikely event that despotic social arrangements were “abolished, masonry lost its *raison d’être*. Prior to this abolition it could be seen as having been a school of civic sociability, an alternative to the traditional” (Jacob, 12). “The goal of government by consent within the context of subordination to ‘legitimate’ authority was vigorously pursued” by London lodges (Jacob, 46). *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

remotest period by the wise men of Egypt and Ethiopia, and handed down only through the priesthood to the recipients of their favors, the mass of mankind being ignorant of their own nature, and consequently prone to rebel against their greatest and best interests. (R, 54)

The wise men of all ancient cultures, Delany writes, “taught the same as necessary to his government on earth – his responsibility to a Supreme Being, the author and Creator of himself. But the mythology of those days, not unlike the scientific theology of the days in which we live, consisted of a sea of such metaphysical depth, that the mass of men were unable to fathom it” (R, 57).

The privileged wisdom of Masonry provides Delany with a precedent for his idealized, hyper-rational education platform. In the olden days, he writes,

Man adhered but little, and cared less, for that in which he could never be fully instructed, nor be made to understand, in consequence of his deficiency in a thorough literary education – this being the exclusive privilege of those in affluent circumstances. All these imperfections have been remedied, in the practical workings of the comprehensive system of Free and Accepted Masonry, as handed down to us from the archives at Jerusalem. All men, of every country, clime, color, and condition, (when morally worthy,) are acceptable to the portals of Masonic jurisprudence. (R, 57)

All free men – again, construed as men who *desire* to be free, regardless of their material condition – are “acceptable” *and* educable under “Masonic jurisprudence,” the wisdom “handed down” from Jerusalem, but traceable to the great men of Africa. Though the prospect gives him pause, Delany is moved, in the pamphlet’s concluding paragraphs, “to tell the world that, as applied to Masonry, the word – *Eureka* – was first exclaimed in Africa? But – there! I have revealed the Masonic *secret*, and *must stop!*” (R, 67). The remarkable ingenuity of this conclusion springs from Delany’s recalibration of reference; he shifts Masonic secrecy’s proper domain from metaphysics to family romance.

At its highest levels of esoteric instruction, Masonry purports to reveal “the universe. Here all instruction *ends*. *Things are seen as they are*; and nature, and the things

of nature, are given to be comprehended” (quoted in Fellows, 114). Delany suggests that Masonry’s most fundamental secret is not what it understands but, on the contrary, what it disavows: its black ancestry. Africans, Delany insists, were “the authors of this mysterious and beautiful Order” (R, 55). This reflects Delany’s belief that “the first flowering of all wisdom was among the blacks of Africa,” as Victor Ullman puts it, and that therefore white Masons – George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and eleven other signers of the Constitution among them – owed their intellectual, fraternal, and even religious heritage to ancient Ethiopian and Egyptian thinkers, whom Delany classed as black Africans (Ullman, 76). Delany’s celebration of African heritage doubles as a critique of the hypocrisy and ingratitude of white Masons, who have perverted the institution by excluding the very people who originated it. Apologizing, with no little irony, for his “slip of the tongue,” Delany justifies his “disclosure” of the “secret” with the compensation that “I may have made the world much wiser” (R, 67).

Soon after arriving on the island, Blake cryptically declares, “I have come to Cuba to help to free my race; and *that which I desire here to do, I’ve done in another place*” (B, 195, my italics). What is Blake claiming he has done, here? Freed his race? Helped to free his race? Desired to help to free his race? Blake’s aim, in the novel’s first half, has been “to complete an organization in every slave state” within two years (B, 42). Though he ostensibly completes (or very nearly completes) the task, Blake leads no insurrection – nor does he overthrow any slaveholders. What Blake does do is establish a charismatic community, and that community becomes, in a crucial sense, the organization for a broader, better, more democratic basis of political organization. It is, I think, putting the cart before the horse to claim that identity has no significant role to play in the

composition of Blake's community; but in its basis as a legitimacy-hungry counterpublic, the Cuban community provides a social imaginary at once more inclusive and militantly opposed to the conventional mores of America's almost spontaneous philosophy of white supremacy. The tragedy of *Blake*, then, is also its triumph – an alternative to the American consensus is only achievable through a kind of magic trick – or, to once again recall Weber – a halo of feelings and dreams.

CONCLUSION

WHEN THE GOING GETS WEIRD, THE WEIRD TURN PRO

“Ah, Jesus... another bad tangent. Somewhere in the back of my mind I recall signing a contract that said I would never do this kind of thing again; one of the conditions of my turning pro was a clause about swearing off gibberish...”

—Hunter S. Thompson

“But as my breakfast-time mantra says, I am a professional. And they don't give out awards for that sort of toe-tap foolishness.”

—John Jeremiah Sullivan

“(I would like you to believe that I kept working out of some real professionalism, to meet the deadline, but that would not be entirely true; I did have a deadline, but it was also a troubled time, and working did to the trouble what gin did to the pain.)”

—Joan Didion

For a handful of years, now numbering in the high-single digits, this project has served as a squalid laboratory for a series of variously reckless experiments – in close reading, historicism, and interdisciplinary research guided more by curiosity than coherence. I have spent some time tracing the contours of a particular (ambitious, defiant, urban, Northern, male) mode of antebellum authorship onto a bespoke map of developments and revisions in a constellation of related terms and concepts: expertise, elitism, professionalization, performance, authority, critique, science, fantasy. In many ways, though, my watchwords have been ambivalence and ambiguity. I am interested in overlaps and blurring, the intersections of clearly defined zones. Martin Delany's firebrand enthusiasm for abolitionism, for instance, cannot be entirely separated from his embattled relationship with more established public figures (and erstwhile allies) like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Allies and enemies were not always, for Delany, discrete categories. Poe tended to antagonize his most powerful friends and admirers until such terms of endearment no longer applied. Melville's towering optimism

for the uncompleted project of American democracy was only matched by his disappointment with the project's stubborn intransigence.

If I have, to this point, told the stories of Poe, Melville, and Delany as individuals, what is the story of the three stories, the metastory of the study, and the history of the composite protagonist? All three came of age in the profoundly weird era of Jacksonian Democracy, when laissez-faire was less an economic policy than an article of faith – though the federally funded transportation infrastructure and centralized financial institutions that would crucially shape the contours of American sociopolitics, right down to our own moment, flew in the face of the Democrats' anti-interventionist ideology. The 1820s and early 1830s had birthed the labor movement in America, as skilled laborers, craftsmen, and “mechanics” in Philadelphia and New York formed trade associations, organized state conferences, and eventually formed the first national, general unions. Then came the Panic of 1837. The Panic triggered widespread layoffs, creating a huge pool of cheap labor. Organizing efforts ground to a halt, and most of the burgeoning associations folded. The Panic effectively killed the labor movement in America until after the Civil War. At almost the same time, in much the same environment, the private sector surged; corporations accrued capital and influence.

After 1840, the lion's share of passengers who hurtled through space at unprecedented speeds on parallel rails and replica rivers ended up in cities. There was no law against pettifogging. State-of-the-art training in pathology and treatment was perfectly compatible with quackery. An honest-to-God clergyman was hard to find in the madding crowd of ministers, reverends, pastors, elders, preachers, revivalists, and messiahs. The air was thick with the spirit of reform, for while reform wasn't cheap, the

spirit was free. Poe, Melville, and Delany launched themselves into this social scrum as aspiring authors, scribbling mercenaries, freelance nomads. They trudged between Boston and New York, Richmond and Philadelphia, Baltimore and Rochester, Edinburgh and Ontario. The three men were dispositional freelancers – the type who would rather complain about being broke than complain about hating work. They wrote on spec or by contract. They were self-employed in the precarious way independent contractors are self-employed, which is to say that they only paid themselves when someone else paid them first.

Poe, Melville, and Delany strove to succeed in a field (writing) that has never been a bastion of rigorous criteria. The market's rise to hegemony simplified the problem, at least from one perspective (i.e., the perspective of the market): If literary works are pure commodities, then merit means maximum profitability at minimum labor cost. But thinking about literary merit through this lens of economic reductionism is so weird as to seem radical (e.g., the Prosperity Gospel, or Donald Trump ranking his all-time favorite books as *The Bible* and *The Art of the Deal*, in that order). To proud American non-conformists, popularity is more apt to be evidence of artistic bankruptcy, of appealing to the lowest common denominator. On the other hand, the the three could not quite afford to strike the pose of Romantic isolatos. Indeed, Poe, Melville, and Delany participated in, and sometimes organized, a range of literary and political associations. Poe and Melville at different times both hitched their wagons to Evert Duyckinck's Literary Young America, and Delany was a fixture of the Black Convention Movement. They wrote in neither purely literary nor wholeheartedly commercial modes. What this meant for Melville, as expressed in his famous "dollars damn me" letter to Hawthorne,

was that “the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.” Truth-telling was something to be admired and pursued, but it was also essentially impossible, particularly when “telling” was in any measure an occupational activity. “Try to get a living by the Truth – and go to the Soup Societies. Heavens! Let any clergyman try to preach the Truth from its very stronghold, the pulpit, and they would ride him out of his church on his own pulpit bannister.”²³⁴

In his seminal “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” William Dean Howells acknowledged, with a mix of professional pride and gentlemanly distaste, that not only has “story-telling” become “a fairly recognized trade,” but that, since the Civil War, the trade has developed “a money-standing in the economic world.”²³⁵ If, by the first decade of the twentieth century, story-tellers could make a living, and even a decent one, *as* story-tellers, the job remained an odd fit in the America whose capital was Wall Street. Even the successful exponent of the *métier* “must still have a low rank among practical people; and he will be regarded by the great mass of Americans as perhaps a little off, a little funny, a little soft!” (6). Howells admits to feeling a certain embarrassment at treating the man of letters straightforwardly as a man of business, because the job is just newfangled and exotic and perhaps schmaltzy enough to strike a discordant note when it is recruited to play with more conventional jobs. If treating the novelist as just any clock-punching wage worker desacralizes the artist’s office, Howells points out a potentially depressing fact about the structure of the modern world: “At present business is the only human solidarity; we are all bound together with that chain, whatever interests and tastes

²³⁴ Herman Melville, *Correspondence* (Chicago: Newberry Library, 1993), 191.

²³⁵ William Dean Howells, “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” *Literature and Life: Studies* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1902) 30-31.

and principles separate us, and I feel quite sure that in writing of the Man of Letters as a Man of Business I shall attract far more readers than I should in writing of him as an Artist” (3). While it’s true, Howells says, that “we had authors, and very good ones” in antebellum America, he cannot “remember any of them who lived by literature except Edgar A. Poe, perhaps; and we all know how he lived; it was largely upon loans. They were either men of fortune, or they were editors or professors” (7). Poe himself was, of course, an editor, but he had a powerful knack for clashing with management on questions of fair pay, editorial oversight, and office decorum. His reputation increasingly preceded him, and Poe increasingly lived up to it.

Autonomy, the great object of Poe’s desire, shrank from his grasp like grapes from Tantalus. Of course – to devolve for a moment into post-Kantian platitudes – autonomy, “self-law,” is impossible in anything like its strict sense. Poe knew this, and saw its horror and its beauty: *Eureka*’s theory of the universe is a theory of material interconnectedness, a vastness filled with atoms, each pulling and pushing every other, all being pushed and pulled. Even matter and spirit are, in *Eureka*, interconnected (i.e., not autonomous). On the other hand, Poe didn’t like to be told what to do. He chased freedom into the mass market of popular art, but the ideal of financial self-sufficiency (which he never so much as sniffed) was crucially instrumental: it would permit creative self-direction and indifference to meddling. (The ideal of creative freedom is perversely dependent on financial self-determination, which helps explain why few working-class kids start art rock bands).

Even more than did Poe, Melville lived on loans, particularly from the prominent jurist – and Melville’s father-in-law – George Lemuel Shaw. Melville was in ever-

growing debt – not least to his own publishers, who awaited their remuneration for advances – and relied on charity for years, a predicament he found as both inescapable and unendurable. Melville's letters to Shaw, mostly written in the period of *The Confidence-Man*'s conception, (unprofitable) publication, and (indifferent) reception are painful to read: the prideful aloofness to Melville's gratitude is clearly meant, but does not quite manage, to disguise his sense of helplessness and humiliation. Melville was a charity case, and he knew it. It is, then, no accident that the sharpest grifters in *The Confidence-Man* ask for charity, too – but they ask as *agents*, as benevolent mediators between the needy and the benevolent public.

Ironically and tragically, Melville's career was at its most commercially successful and least emotionally agonizing when his brother, Gansevoort Melville, took care of the business side. Gansevoort, a prominent fixture and successful orator for the Democratic Party, essentially campaigned for his brother's nascent career as a novelist as one might a first-time nominee. He coaxed an endorsement from Washington Irving, the undisputed doyen of American letters, and secured established publishers – John Murray in England, Wiley & Putnam in New York – for *Typee*, Herman's debut novel. Then Gansevoort died. Evert Duyckinck was the closest Melville ever came to replacing Gansevoort. But Duyckinck – the spiritual leader and editorial overseer of Young America, a political faction-*cum*-high culture clique – had his own agenda that, Melville was surprised to learn, did not quite rhyme with Melville's own. Duyckinck had for years been calling, and was still waiting, for a Genius to spring up from the democratic throng, and summarily to smash Old World tradition, to overturn England's rules of and rule over art, and to inaugurate a great, lasting, Democratic tradition of American literature. Melville,

not unmoved, gave him *Moby-Dick*. It turned out not to be what Duyckinck had had in mind, quite. Duyckinck's chilly dismissal of Melville's toweringly ambitious and equally idiosyncratic tour de force was a not-insignificant factor in the etiology of Melville's shattering authorial identity crisis, which hounded him throughout the fifties and lingered for the rest of his life. Melville's new style of storytelling broke the old rules, but it also broke the rules that Duyckinck hadn't yet been able to get down clear in black and white. He would, he was sure, know them when he saw them, and for this reason, Duyckinck believed that American *literature* would have to wait for American *criticism*. Once some gifted analyst had blazed the trail by formulating and systematizing principles, but not until then, America's autochthonous Genius would take care of the rest.

In a twist that will surprise no one who has stuck with me from the beginning, the best candidate Duyckinck had found for the role of America's critic was Edgar Allan Poe. In November 1844, Poe became the newest, and probably the most cynically motivated, Young American. Where in years past he had dismissed literary nationalism as complacent provincial prejudice, the Poe of 1844 couldn't get enough of the stuff. It was, for a time, great for his career.²³⁶ Meanwhile, under Duyckinck's philosophico-editorial guidance, Young America embraced Poe's "critical ideals" only far enough to retrofit those principles to fit the skeleton of literary nationalism. Never one to toe the party line, Poe was alarmed to discover he had *become* the party line. In her analysis of Poe's seeming enthusiasm for self-destruction after 1844 – a longstanding critical puzzle – Meredith McGill argues, "the crisis for Poe is not that he is forced to embrace literary nationalist ideals in order to advance his career. Rather, his autonomy is jeopardized

²³⁶ For Poe's lit-nat period, see J.G. Kennedy, "'a Mania for Composition': Poe's Annus Mirabilis and the Violence of Nation-Building," *American Literary History* 17.1 (2005): 1-35.

when the literary nationalists embrace *his* principles, invoking him as an idealized figure of independent judgment within their discourse.”²³⁷ That the Poe’s personal collapse, his frantic escape from the clutches of Young American dogma, and his turn toward speculative cosmology all happened at roughly the same time was only literally a coincidence. He reached hard for a kind of intellectual ascendancy more resistant to appropriation, to dogmatization. This effort culminated in *Eureka*.

The publication of the tract was, to Poe, epochal — a genuine event. In his personal correspondence, Poe regarded (or, at the very least, worked very hard to pretend to regard) his future influence as guaranteed and well deserved: “What I have propounded will (in good time) revolutionize the world of Physical and Meta-physical Science.”²³⁸ Poe’s pitch for *Eureka* was colorful enough for inclusion in the memoirs of George Putnam, its (eventual, reluctant) publisher. As Putnam tells it, Poe trumpeted his completion of a work of such “momentous interest” that “Newton’s discovery of gravitation was a mere incident compared to the discoveries revealed.” This revelation would ripple outward, revolutionizing not just thought but also the life and business of the man lucky enough to win the right to publish it: *Eureka* would, he said, “at once command such universal and intense attention that the publisher might give up all other enterprises, and make this one book the business of his lifetime.” Amused more than inspired by Poe’s giddy suggestion that an “edition of fifty thousand copies might be sufficient to begin with,” Putnam ventured to issue “not upon fifty thousand, but five

²³⁷ Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2003), 191.

²³⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2 volumes, ed. John Ward Ostrom (New York: Gordian, 1966), 2:650.

hundred.”²³⁹ The edition sold poorly; *Eureka* netted its author \$14, all from an advance Putnam seems to have given partly out of pity, and partly as a bribe to get Poe to leave his office. (Poe later drafted and signed a contract stipulating that he, Poe, would “repay the said amount of Fourteen Dollars and I also engage not to ask or apply for any other loans or advances from said Putnam in any way.”²⁴⁰)

Delany ran in a different circle, but the social dynamics are, to a certain extent, familiar. The National Negro Convention Movement had served, since 1830, as a prime hub in emergent black-led efforts at black-led political organization and black-led civil institutions. The discussions, at the conventions themselves and in the parallel conversations in the black abolitionist press, were undertaken in a collaborative spirit, and though they shared goals and values, the delegates increasingly came to incompatible conclusions about the imminent prospects, advisable means, and moral imperatives behind shibboleths like “elevation” and “present condition.” In its early years, the movement had wholeheartedly hitched its star to the Garrisonian strategy of “moral suasion,” the idea that pro-slavery crusaders could be converted, in the profoundest sense, into abolitionists through proselytizing. Moral suasionists sought to cure America’s (and Americans’) moral diseases with rhetorical nostrums: truth will triumph over error; love must defeat hate; sympathy evaporates cruelty; repentance redeems sin. It wore the rose-tinted goggles of American reform – the nation, it thought, *would inevitably* be perfected, and we must only work hard, and be disciplined, to usher in the millennium.

The individual moments in Delany’s career makes a certain overarching sense

²³⁹ George Palmer Putnam, *George Palmer Putnam: A Memoir* (New York: Putnam, 1912), 396-97.

²⁴⁰ Putnam, 136-37.

when you entertain the hypothesis that Delany was driven by an urgent call – something between a desire and a drive – to beat Frederick Douglass, the movement’s most prominent figure. The nimble Douglass tended to be a half step ahead of Delany – a schooner and a frigate, a fly and an elephant, etc. But on the political, even revolutionary, efficacy of moral suasion, Delany was leagues ahead. Its naïf optimism and abhorrence of force, he argued, did more to preserve white supremacy than overthrow it; its overwhelming faith in moral probity and good manners and nonviolent conflict resolution made the enemies of racism docile when they should have been hostile. Douglass stuck to his moral suasionist guns (assuredly loaded with blanks) even after 1850, a year wherein every branch of American government seemed bent on making the situation for blacks, even or even especially free blacks, worse: the executive-legislative Compromise included the Fugitive Slave Laws, and the high court’s Dred Scott decision ruled that blacks could not be citizens – nor, therefore, Americans in any legally significant sense.

Delany was, perversely, a victim of his lifetime of (relative) liberty. As one abolitionist colleague wrote to Garrison in 1842, “The public have itching ears to hear a colored man speak, and particularly a *slave*. Multitudes will flock to hear one of his class.”²⁴¹ Douglass’s Garrison-published *Narrative* (1845) sold 30,000 copies in fifteen years. Harriet Beecher Stowe unwittingly provided a template that both Delany and Douglass, with his *Heroic Slave*, would try to follow, when her philosophically thoughtful, politically urgent longform piece of fiction turned out to be a popular smash to boot. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sold 300,000 copies in its first year in print (1852, after being serialized the previous year), and provided Stowe with annual royalties that averaged

²⁴¹ Quoted in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates’s Introduction to *The Slave’s Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).

\$10,000 for the next two decades. By comparison, sales of Delany's self-published political treatise, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered* (1852), were statistically insignificant. The book earned its author not a dime.

The novel also established, all but singlehandedly, Harriet Beecher Stowe as an authority on the black American experience and the politics of slavery. When Frederick Douglass visited Stowe, in 1853, with the goal of obtaining “some method which should contribute successfully, and permanently, to the improvement and elevation of the free people of color in the United States,” Delany was coolly outraged. In a letter rebuking Douglass's reliance on a white woman for uplift of oppressed blacks, Delany — after faux-diplomatically claiming to speak “in all due respect and deference to Mrs. Stowe” — seethes, “*she knows nothing about us*, ‘the Free Colored people of the United States,’ [and] neither does any other white person—and, consequently, can contrive no successful scheme for our elevation; it must be done by ourselves.”²⁴² Douglass's response, that Delany has only shown that he “knows nothing about Mrs. Stowe,” prompts Delany to backtrack: his depiction of Stowe's absolute ignorance was “ironical, and not intended to be taken in its literal sense; but I meant to be understood in so saying, that they know nothing, comparatively, about us, to the intelligent, reflecting, general observers among the Free Colored People of the North” (R, 232). It is, of course, rhetorically playful nonsense to say that a categorical absolute (“nothing”) is merely *relatively* absolute (nothing only in comparison to something else). But Delany's point is that Stowe capitalized, financially and reputationally, on the black experience of the black condition,

²⁴² Martin R. Delany, *Martin R. Delany: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2003), 224, author's italics. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text as R.

despite what Delany saw as her constitutive blindness to that experience. Implied here is a kind of proto-Black Arts view that black experience is a prerequisite to black knowledge, and black knowledge a prerequisite to black leadership: No white person has any positive knowledge of the black condition as it is lived, so white efforts to describe black reality amount to so much fumbling for a light-switch in a cornfield.

Most obviously, Douglass and Delany's dispute was over the virtues and evils of emigration – the project of establishing a nation, populated and governed by expatriated African-Americans, beyond the geographical and ideological boundaries of the United States. Douglass said no; Delany said yes. More interestingly, their debate is also over expert knowledge: who has it, how they got it, and how one knows they have it and *deserve* it. Delany's polemical intent, then, is to pry open a space for black authority on black reality. If it is true that black people “have always fallen into great errors in efforts of this kind, going to others than the intelligent and experienced among ourselves,” Delany wonders, “Why, in God's name, don't the leaders among our people make suggestions, and *consult* the most competent among *their own* brethren concerning our elevation?” (R, 224, 225). He acidly observes that “nothing that has as yet been gotten up by our friends, for the assistance of the colored people of the United States, has even been of any pecuniary benefit to them. Our white friends take care of *that* part.” The fact that “Douglass's printing establishment” is a rare exception to this rule, Delany implies, is both a tribute to Douglass's industriousness and an implicit condemnation of his willingness to collaborate with the white establishment — to sell out the cause for his own financial interests. Ultimately, Delany “would not give the counsel of one dozen INTELLIGENT COLORED freemen of the RIGHT STAMP, for that of all the white and

unsuitable colored persons in the land” (R, 234).

Delany went on to emigrate to Canada for freedom *from* domination, freedom from America, but this geographical distancing also distanced him personally from the political project of abolitionism; during the Civil War, he returned to the States in search of political power — freedom *to* remake the nation whose principles he cherished, whose practices he abominated. He seems to have written his only novel, at least mostly, while living in Chatham, Ontario — a period of limited opportunities for civic engagement and political activism. Of course, he hoped to replicate the cataclysmic success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but he also was driven to point out the structural imbalance and ideological absurdity that made a white woman from New England the nation’s leading expert on the black experience. The badge of Delany’s knowledge about blackness was his blackness — a credential he insistently held against his friend, collaborator, and nemesis, Douglass.

I’ve thought of this dissertation as a sort of prehistory, a snapshot of an (but not *the*) inaugurating moment in the writerly struggle to earn prestige and stability without losing the license of dilettantish dabbling. Poe, Melville, and Delany were not wealthy men. They struggled to attract patrons. They tended to overrate the earning potential of the works they scribbled, often painstakingly, often in a slapdash rush. They also wrote, in a sense, in a pre-professional era — but writing has always been, in a sense, a para-professional activity. Trying to situate one’s position in the “professional” field has long been a preoccupation of American writers. This conclusion’s subtitle is Hunter S. Thompson’s densely ironic maxim, “When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.” It is most often taken to mean something about taking lots of drugs to write in the pocket of inspired, brilliant nonsense, and surely there is some of that. But I think there is

something else there, too, something more plangent and searching. Thompson's "the weird" preexist the situation of weirdness. Mobilizing what he fondly called "freak power" against the corruption of oligarchies (class, wealth, politics) was what Thompson did best, and he always did it through writing. Writing is nobody's best bet for professional status, if professional status means middle-class normalcy. But an ideal of professionalism – the ideal of disinterest, and the innerly-felt sense of a calling, of doing a job for something more than money – came to inform the (generally rather deviant, at least statistically) occupation of writing the moment it came into being. That moment, as I have tried to show, was right around 1840, and writers like Poe, Melville, and Delany were among the first writers to feel it.

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